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Storytelling 101

A good deal of my gaming time lately has been spent with smaller, downloadable games like Trine, World of Goo, Trash Panic and Shatter—all richly enjoyable experiences that don't halt the gameplay to tell a story. The iPhone has also delivered some really fun, pint-sized games like Peggle and Primrose, which have removed me even further from the AAA world of massive production values and bigger-budget mentalities and—the continuing reliance on trying to tell a traditional story inside the active gameplay space.

It seems that the more my gaming diet is fed with games that aren't so caught up in trying to be a movie, the more turned off I become when I jump into a world that has characters talking nonsense and storytelling devices that fracture the gameplay experience. I don't think our stories are any better or worse than they were a few years ago; they're just consistently bad, and consistently making the same major mistakes.

I was talking a bit to my colleague Heather Campbell about this problem, and her response was quite simple: "I hate cut scenes." Dave Halverson chimed in with a strong analogy: "It can be like two opposing ingredients being thrown into the sauce, and it's just weaker in the end." Our designer Mike Hobbs made a great point, which has been echoed in conversations I've had with some frustrated developers: "Let's remove talking from games altogether. Nintendo does it, because they know better."

All this chatter needs proper context, of course. Next month, we're collectively going to tread much deeper into this idea that storytelling is an important issue that demands attention. My argument: the damage being done to the spirit of what drives a game is more severe than we might realize. And the topic is densely multidimensional. Never mind the complexities of how to structure a film-like narrative over an active gameplay path. Start with the most basic of offenses first: get rid of stupid dialogue; bring character to our characters; stop with the vapid one-liners; admit that the stories have no plot and therefore no pop; and don't take moments that just aren't serious so seriously.

As a sneak peek, what I find most interesting in this topic is the difference between an avatar—the controllable character acting as a blank slate on which to imprint your imagination—and a character defined by the writer who created him. Add to that the turbulence of authorial actions we bring to the space as the player.

There are moments when I say get rid of trying to tell a story and just make games! Then there are moments when I say, and know for certain, that we must tell stories in our games, we must mine the deepest treasures of emotion. Portal stands as a great example—I've heard some argue the best example—of why I do believe story has a place in a game. And of course, a central idea of an RPG is to sweep you along in an interactive novel. This is not a conversation that begins and ends with right and wrong.

We must tell stories in our games; we must mine the deepest treasures of emotion.

Ahh, this debate is gonna be fun! Join us next month for the Play Narrative Roundtable (or something like that), and in the mean time, the September issue awaits. May I suggest your journey begin with the magical fairy tale that is Muramasa. There's quite a story behind this one...

~Brady Fiechter

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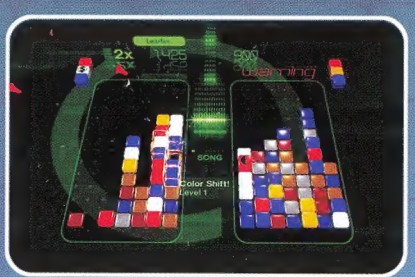

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September 2009

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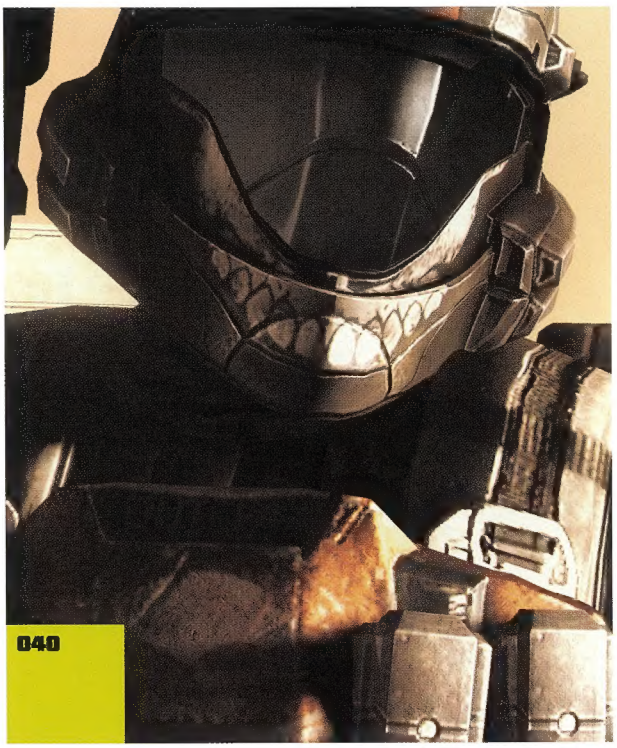
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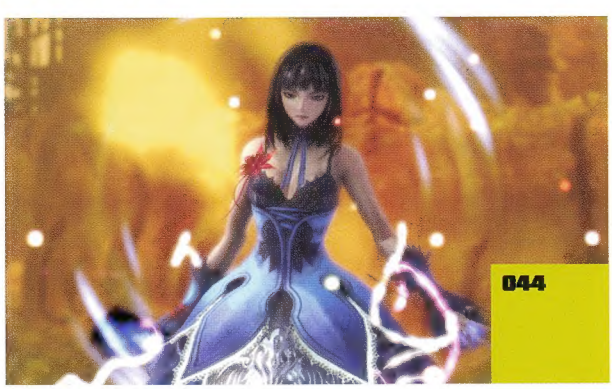
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XBOX 360

art Robert Duenas

Did You See Comic-Con?

words Heather Anne Campbell

The best part of San Diego Comic-Con is never the con itself, but the periphery. No human being can be at every panel, every booth, every announcement. You can't see every costume, nor buy every trinket. So, the whole of Comic-Con becomes a series of missed moments, exchanged later among friends and forums like currency. That's the best part of Comic-Con—the swapped stories, the traded posters and buttons. Did you see James Cameron's *Avatar* panel? No, I didn't. Part of me wanted to catch the 25 minutes of footage from the upcoming film, but part of me didn't want to see it at all. The majesty of movies can be reduced, when exhibited unfinished. So, you may have seen it, but I didn't.

But did you see Flynn's arcade? Viral marketing for *Tron: Legacy*, Flynn's arcade was a recreation of the location from the original film ... and like all the best parts of Comic-Con, it was nowhere near the exhibit hall. I wandered into the arcade late Thursday because I was looking for something to do. Now, most people there didn't get as wrapped up in their games of Space Paranoids or Marble Madness as I did, so they were ready to walk into a secret room when the back wall swung open to reveal concept art for the upcoming sequel. I kept my head down—working on a high score—and had to be alerted by a staff member that I'd missed out on the Big Reveal. She opened the door manually, and sent me into the back hall to check out the Light Cycle, and receive a free T-shirt.

Did I see Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* panel? No. I hear Johnny Depp walked out to introduce Tim Burton, and then was escorted away to his fabulous life of unlimited wealth and pleasure. I caught the trailer online, later, but a 320-by-240 Quicktime frame is nothing like watching a guided tour of Wonderland by the director. So, no, I didn't see the *Alice in Wonderland* panel.

But did you see the closed Hard-Rock Hotel party for Sega's Bayonetta? I doubt it, there weren't a lot of people there. The staff of the game, as well as the character designer, joined a few fans in a weird little carpeted room, to give us an exclusive preview of the upcoming title that hits next January. A score-attack contest was held, and one lucky player walked away with a motion-capture prop of Scarborough Fair—one of the guns used by the protagonist. (When I left the event to head to another event, I was the top scorer—forgive me, readers, for leaving too early.) The designers talked briefly about their experience with the game, and showed exclusive art that chronicled Bayonetta's development from a black-haired witch, to a blond vixen...and back again. Did you see Bayonetta?

The best part of San Diego Comic-Con is never the con itself, but the periphery.

There are infinite stories from Comic-Con. Did you see the Masquerade? The shockingly accurate Bumblebee costume outside? Did you see Scribblenauts on the show floor? Maybe you saw the steam-punk booth, or the other steam-punk booth, or caught one of Play's artists drawing up original art for subscribers. Feel free to trade your Comic-Con currency at playmagazine.com. Because the best part of Comic-Con is the schwag we share now.

Gaming Gone By
File #007

Sega's Final Console Dream 1999

There is only one possible topic that could be considered for this month's look back at video gaming: the Sega Dreamcast.

While gamers these days consider the party lines to be Sony/Microsoft/Nintendo, for a great many older gamers, the true console wars were those fought between Nintendo and Sega. Before becoming a third-party publisher, Sega was a name known for hardware as much as it was software, bringing the world projects such as the Sega Master System, Sega Genesis, Game Gear, and Sega Saturn.

It was Sega's last attempt at being a major console player, however, that some to this day still consider to be its best. Released in North America ten years ago on September 9, 1999 (aka 9/9/99), the Sega Dreamcast was the first of the sixth generation of consoles, ushering in an era of gaming hardware that was finally able to do real justice to the idea of 3D gaming.

Right from the start, the ambitious nature of the Dreamcast could be seen. Long before Xbox Live would exist to help gaming go global, Sega tried to push the notion of online gaming for video game consoles by having every Dreamcast sold come with a built-in 56k modem. (Which could, for the more hardcore players, be swapped out for the mythical Dreamcast broadband adapter.) In fact, it would be online gaming that would be used to try to help the platform when sales started to dwindle, as Sega went so far as to offer what amounted to a free Dreamcast to anybody signing up for two years of their online gaming service SegaNet. Another revolutionary feature of the Dreamcast was the Visual Memory Unit, a memory card that could not only be plugged into another VMU for file transferring, but also into the Dreamcast controller itself to act as a mini display that could use for things such as football plays or a player's hand in a card game.

Unfortunately, a stellar line-up of quality games and a dedicated fanbase just weren't enough to save the Dreamcast, and on January 31, 2001, Sega officially announced the end not only of the Dreamcast, but also of their life as a producer of gaming hardware. To this day, Sega's final system continues to be beloved by fans around the world, to the point that many (jokingly, of course) eagerly await September 9th, 2009 (9/9/09), when the Dreamcast 2 is predicted to rise for the ashes and make Sega the king of the console world again.

Last nanosecond reveal:

Gangs of the Wild West

Bits

Tatsunoko vs. Capcom getting 5 additional characters for US version

Ghostbusters passes the million-sold mark; Dragon Quest IX pushes 2.3 million first week in stores (besting DQVIII on PS2); Battlefield 1943 breaks download sales record with 600K in its first week, one-upping the previous title holder Lost and the Damned

Classic TurboGrafx/PC Engine games no longer for Japanese gamers only, as Hudson states their intention to release several classics on PSN

Live Free or Die Hard director Len Wiseman is helming the Gears of War picture, but you won't be seeing Dwayne Johnson doing the space marine thing: "A Doom connection would not be smart for us," said Wiseman

Over a million levels have been created by users for Little Big Planet

Valve's Gabe Newell poses the question: what would happen if the gaming community was invited to invest in a property during pre production and share in any profits after the game's release?

Steam launches "Family Gaming" arm

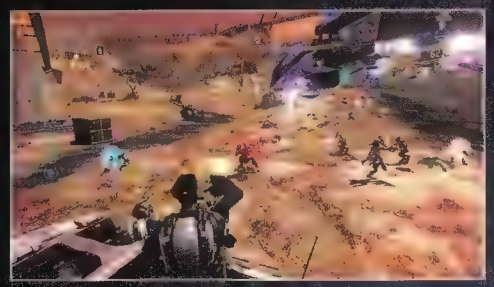
President Obama says "put away the Xbox," kids!

Halo lives on…in animated form, as seven shorts go into production, called *Halo Legends*, created by talents behind the likes of *Animatrix* and *Ghost in the Shell*

EA follows up their staged religious picketing for Dante's Inferno at E3 with the offer to "commit acts of lust" with the babes at Comic-Con

The holiday rush softens: Bioshock 2, Heavy Rain, and Bayonnetta and a few other big titles push back to 2010

Spider-Man director Sam Raimi to direct World of WarCraft movie



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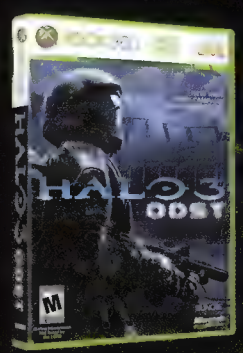

XBOX LIVE BUNGIE Microsoft game studios

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I am not a blanched, homogenous, heterosexual, typical Western consumer. G4/Spike TV does not fully represent me. Giant Bomb does not speak for me. Will the time come when Play will not speak to me as well? It would suck when Play and all print media become online only. I do not fear the digital revolution, but I refuse to allow myself to be swept up like a mindless fish in the rush of progress. I refuse to be always connected. I enjoy my alone time. I like my phone's silent mode. I relish the physicality of walking around a store and browsing. I like holding and touching things, reading words and looking at pictures that aren't backlit. I love reading manuals; I want to know everything about my new product. I love re-reading old issues of Play and other rags while sitting on the toilet or stretched out on my lounger on a balmy summer night. I keep the boxes of all my gaming machines and games and display them proudly in my game room. I keep close to my heart the memories of unwrapping my NES and Super NES on Christmas. Clearly I enjoy and respect history—from humanity's big picture, to my own, to the fascinating histories of my passions and hobbies. I am very excited about the future. I love technology. I love technology as a tool, not as a god nor religion. I want to determine technology's place in my life, not my place in the life of technology.

I relish the physicality of walking around a store and browsing.

John Oliva, Rancho Cucamonga

All told, the future of gaming needs to be better games, not better distribution models, we don't need systems that have Facebook, Twitter, and myspace glued into the firmware, we need systems that let us gather, either on a couch or on a server, and have fun. Because isn't that the point of a game? To have fun?

Trevor Alexandre

The sales of Bionic Commando have been incredibly disappointing. I work at a video game store and have been recommending it enthusiastically to my customers. Unfortunately, too many reviewers have given Bionic Commando "bad" scores. Even "hardcore" gamers find it difficult to spend $60 on more than one game a month, and when the gaming press gives a game average review scores lower than 8 there is not much I can do to convince people that it's worth a purchase. I think Capcom made a mistake by not putting out a single player demo. Although I enjoy the multiplayer, a single player demo of one of the awesome sections (maybe the sniper section in the gardens) could have really boosted sales.

I respect any reviewer's right to present honest opinions on a game, but far too often it seems like the gaming press have made their decisions about what games are going to be "good" before they've even been released. I appreciate you guys getting rid of review scores. Even if Bionic Commando is a 7.5 (which it isn't) there are still reasons to play it. It's the sequel to a true classic, it has amazing visuals, and Mike Patton is the voice of the main character! If anyone out there hasn't purchased Bionic Commando yet, go do it now. If you already own it, go tell your friends to buy it! Maybe we can still make a sequel possible!

Neil Kivlin

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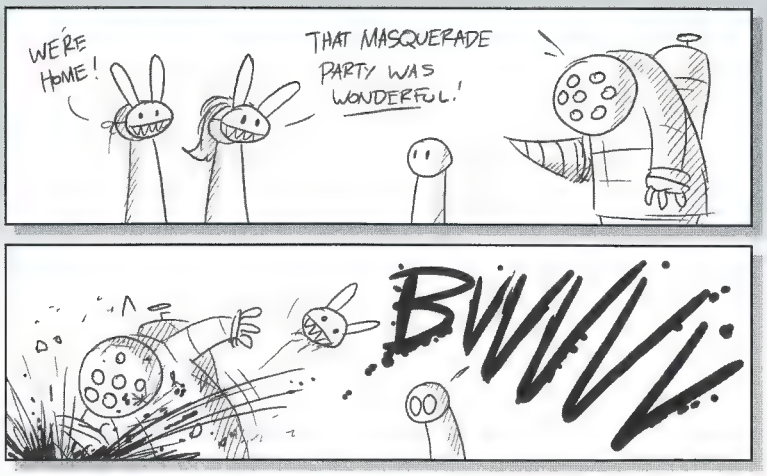

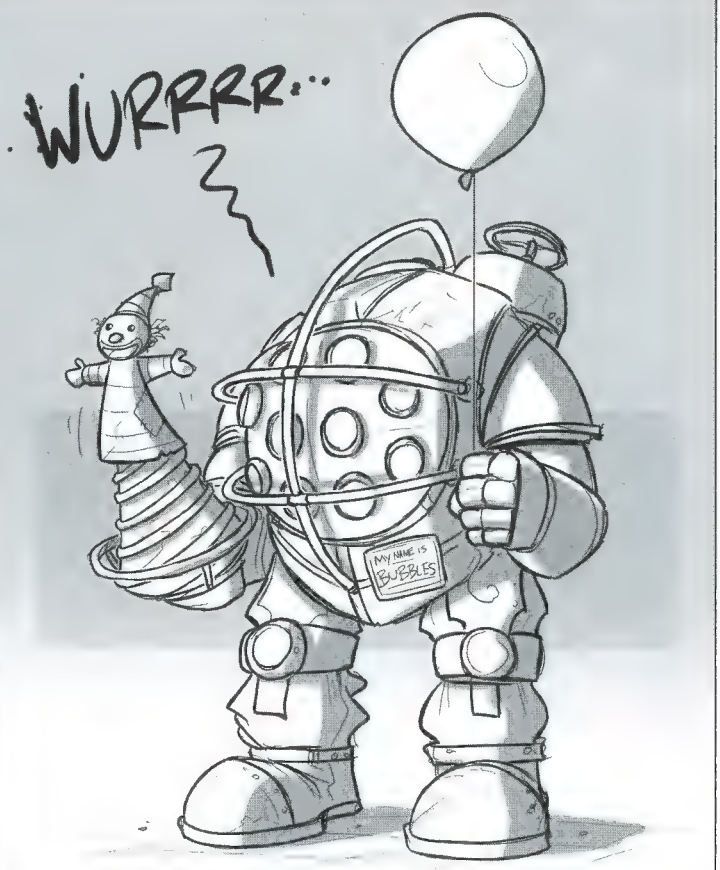

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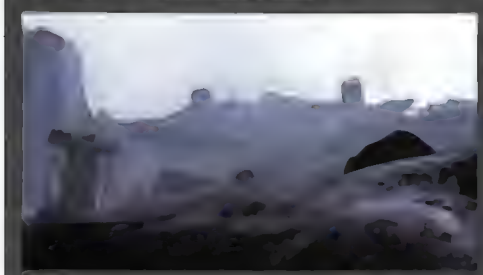
Crowded Field, Modest Diversity, Slowly Implode Industry

After a huge 2008 holiday season and strong spring, it seemed as though the game industry was largely immune to the effects of the recession. This summer, however, we've seen dramatic highs and lows and an abundance of movement and instability, clearly the fallout of economic uncertainty. The Donkey Kong in the room was the June NPD report, documenting a 29% slump in US software sales.

It's often best to look at leaders to measure an industry's health. Mega-publisher Ubisoft announced its quarterly sales were down 51% compared to the same period (March-June) last year, and Sam Fisher won't be around to save the day this holiday season. Both Splinter Cell: Conviction and the Wii MotionPlus-powered Red Steel 2 have slipped to the first quarter of 2010. Ubisoft's promising new IP I Am Alive has drifted towards a mid-2010 window (as Ubisoft Shanghai takes over development from Darkworks), along with the highly-anticipated new Ghost Recon title. Ubisoft always finds a way to bounce back, but we see that even giants are feeling the economic downturn.

THQ goes big with Red Faction and UFC



Speaking of stumbling giants, we officially bid adieu to Midway this summer. After dancing with bankruptcy for years, they took a final dip and bow, relinquishing most of the company's stock and assets to Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. WB picks up the profitable Mortal Kombat studio in the deal, soon morphing it into WB Games Chicago (likely no Fatality! for the franchise). WBIE has quietly assimilated a great deal of developer/publisher real-estate lately, and this move is a perfect replacement for some of the ground they lost in Eidos after the Square Enix takeover.

Yes, we musn't forget that early this summer Square Enix acquired Eidos, and with it, all those juicy Eidos IPs, like Tomb Raider, Deux Ex and Thief. The dust has yet to fully settle on that deal, as we anxiously await news of each studios' fate—especially Crystal Dynamics, who reportedly lost several people post-SE acquisition, but are now hiring again for a new AAA IP, and Eidos Montreal, the talented caretakers of Deus Ex 3 and Thief 4.

Historically, THQ has always relied on huge sports entertainment hits to stay afloat, and 2009 is no different. Looking to avoid Midway's fate, THQ has experienced a significant return to form thanks to its massive hit, UFC Undisputed, which moved a cool 3 million copies since its mid-May release. Red Faction: Guerilla chips into the reversal of fortune with over one million copies shipped for 360 and PS3, and THQ confirms a beefed-up PC version for September.

Speaking of stumbling giants, we officially bid adieu to Midway this summer.

XBOX LIVE arcade

The biggest recession-defying surge is undoubtedly in digital downloads, thriving over the past year despite the rocky market. In late July, Gamasutra reported huge gains for three of the industry's most popular DLC hubs: Microsoft's Xbox Live, Valve's Steam, and IGN's Direct2Drive. Xbox Live posted a 73% increase in paid downloads from June '08 to June '09, boasting Arcade hits like the million selling Castle Crashers and EA's Battlefield 1943—which enjoyed the most successful launch in the service's history. Valve continues to bring key partners, games and services to Steam, while giving indie and casual developers outstanding exposure. Year-over-year, Steam has enjoyed a spike of 97% in download sales. Direct2Drive reported revenue gains of 56% over 12 months, as fans enjoy a massive catalogue of game publishers, very fast downloads, and of course the spectacular Girls of Gaming.

The MMO gaming realm remains fairly stagnant: World of Warcraft finally patched-up its partner woes in China (where close to 6 million players were left without game servers for over a month) in late July, ensuring WoW's reign as global leader in subscription-based titles. Despite suffering an early year casualty in the West, with the shuttering of Tabula Rasa, NCsoft is creating significant buzz globally with Aion, now boasting close to 4 million players—with US and European launches on track for late September.

Secret "Lawsuit Trophy" Unlocked in Resistance: Fall of Man

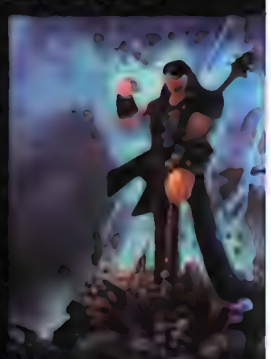
Erik Estavillo of San Jose, California, has filed suit against SCEA for pain and suffering following his ban from the PlayStation Network. His case: That the multiplayer game Resistance: Fall of Man is his only outlet for socializing due to his extreme agoraphobia, or fear of crowds, thus Sony has infringed on his right to free speech by a ban which he says is based solely on the bias of moderators. No details have yet been released on the exact reason why Estavillo was banned.

Despite the fact that First Amendment rights only apply to government institutions and not private property (like gaming forums created by SCEA), and there's also some "fine print" issues in which SCEA retains the right to ban a player and keep his pre-paid funds, our heart goes out to Erik Estavillo as he continues the fight to prove that hardcore gaming and grifting the system for arbitrarily large amounts of cash are not mutually exclusive.

Brütal Irony

Remember last year, when the newly-merged Activision Blizzard decided to shuck itself of properties unlikely to lead to a major franchise? Suddenly several high-profile one-off projects like Ghostbusters were left without a publisher. Though most quickly found a new host, Tim Schafer and Double Fine's heavy metal adventure Brütal Legend was left grasping. In December the recently progressive Electronic Arts stepped up, and all seemed back on track.

Or maybe not.



On June 4 Activision Blizzard filed to block publication of Brütal Legend, insisting that the game's release would "seriously harm" the company. They said they had invested millions of dollars, and technically they were still in contract with Double Fine. Plus, they wanted merchandising.

In July Tim Schafer rolled his eyes and counter-filed against Activision, saying the megapublisher had clearly abandoned the project -- though not before bizarrely trying to retrofit it into a Guitar Hero spin-off. Furthermore, unlike Activision, Double Fine's future rested in this game. Double Fine further claims that Activision has confused the game for a competitor to Guitar Hero, and so has conspired "not only to cancel Brütal Legend, but to kill it completely so that Guitar Hero would not have to face the competition."

On July 30th, Judge Craig Karlan delayed ruling for another week. His tentative conclusion was to deny Activision's motion.

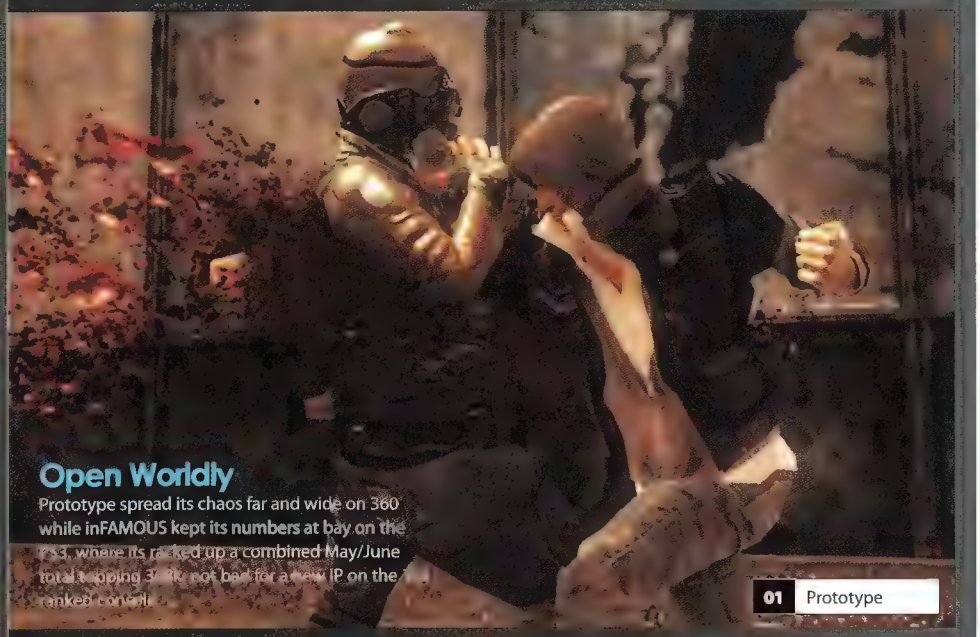
NPD GROUP

DATABASE

SEPTEMBER **2009**

Top 10 Console Game Sales June 2009

01	Prototype	Xbox 360	Activision	419.9k
02	UFC 2009: UNDISPUTED	Xbox 360	THQ	338.3k
03	EA Sports Active Bundle	Wii	EA	289.1k
04	Tiger Woods PGA Tour 10	Wii	EA	272.4k
05	Wii Fit	Wii	Nintendo	271.6k
06	Fight Night Round 4	Xbox 360	EA	260.8k
07	Fight Night Round 4	PS3	EA	210.3k
08	Mario Kart w/wheel	Wii	Nintendo	202.1
09	Red Faction: Guerrilla	Xbox 360	THQ	199.4k
10	inFAMOUS	PS3	SCEA	192.7k



Open Worldly

Prototype spread its chaos far and wide on 360 while inFAMOUS kept its numbers at bay on the PS3, where its racked up a combined May/June total topping 3.8k, not bad for a new IP on the 3rd ranked console.

01 Prototype

Hardware Units June 2009

PlayStation 2	152.7k
PlayStation 3	164.7k
PSP	163.5k
Xbox 360	240.6k
Wii	361.7k
NDS	766.5k

J-List Theater

005: Take Me Home

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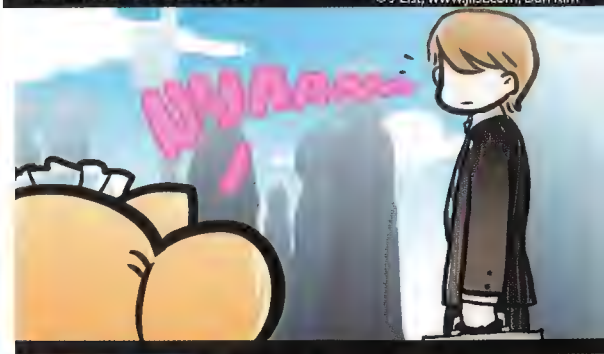


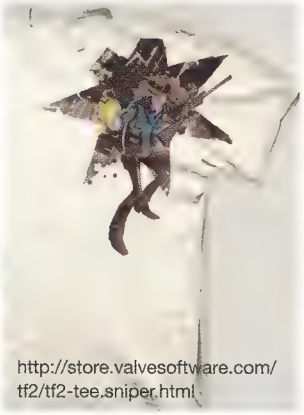
gaming culture

words Evan Shamoon

Material World

T-shirt and toy junkies have much to lust after this month. For starters, an official Eddie Riggs statue (he of Brutal Legend fame, and voiced by Jack Black) sculpted by Mark Newman and colored by Tom Vukmanic, shows Mr. Riggs leaping from a pile of skulls and horns. The statue is limited to only 1,000 pieces worldwide; it's still unclear how you'll be able to get your hands on one, but keep your eyes on the Brutal Legend website to do just that. More straightforward monetary transactions can be made for a Tetris t-shirt (available for both men and women) by Australia's Junior Massive label, as well as a host of Team Fortress 2 tees now available on Steam (no digital download, unfortunately).

http://www.juniormassive.com/?page_id=19



http://store.valvesoftware.com/tf2/tf2-tee.sniper.html

http://www.brutallegend.com/home.action

http://cymonsgames.retroremakes.com/

Portal ASCII

The ASCIIpOrtal project is a recreation of the critically acclaimed PC title, Portal—only this one is being built exclusively using ASCII characters. Created by Cymon Games, the remake is currently going through beta testing, and should be released by the time you read this. Expect puzzles, rotating levels, and a large helping of awesomeness.

Left 4 Shaun of the Dead

Pop culture junkies take note: a Shaun of the Dead mod is on its way for Left 4 Dead (the PC version only for now). The five-map campaign will take players from Shaun's Pad, to Mum's House, to Lizz's Flat, to the Winchester for a final showdown (where the jukebox will summon the horde).

Polytronic Spree

M

HAVE THE SOUL SWORDS
MET THEIR MATCH?
SOULCALIBUR
Broken Destiny
TEEN
T
Mild Language
Partial Nudity
Suggestive Themes
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING
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WWW.SOULCALIBUR.COM
PlayStation.Portable
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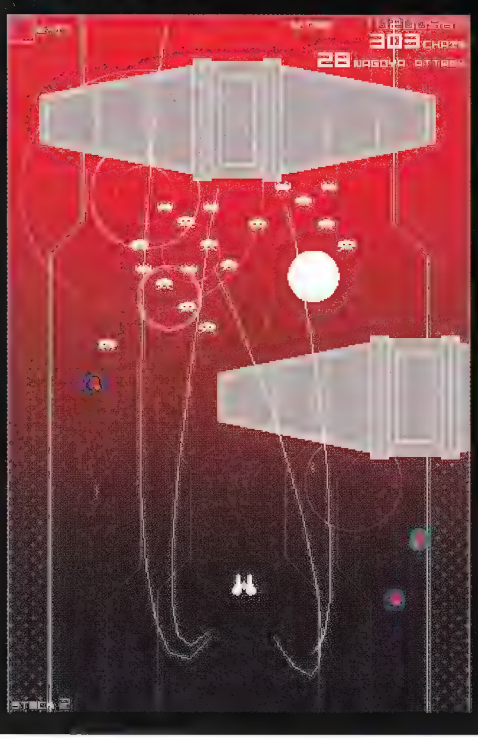
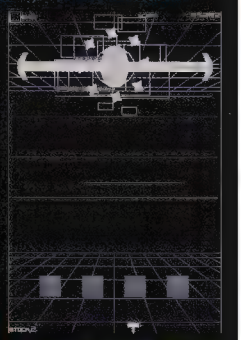
iPhone GAMING

words Evan Shamoon

Space Invaders: Infinity Gene

As long as there are videogames, it seems, there will be Space Invaders. Case-in-point: another new iteration of the franchise, called Space Invaders: Infinity Gene, will be coming to the iPhone this summer. With its sharp, monochromatic vector look (oddly reminiscent of the original), it also incorporates elements like mega bosses, weapon powerups, and controls not limited to the X-axis (in other words, it borrows from the thousands of games it has inspired). With a low-fi soundtrack and some amazing visual flourishes, it's definitely one to watch.





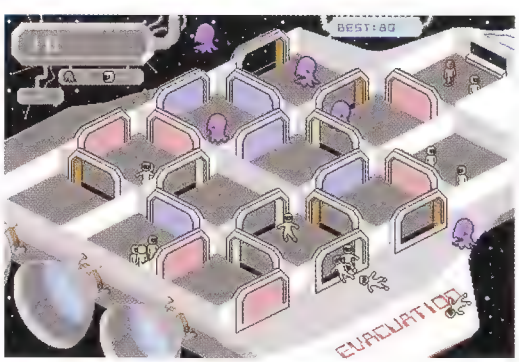
iPSOne

Behold the single most charming iPhone case to date. Conceived and created by Etsy user rabbitrampage, this little slice of felt heaven will cost you $20—plus another $7 per controller dangle. Which, combined, is actually cheaper than the cheesy, mass-produced pieces of plastic at the Apple Store that cost their manufacturers about a buck apiece to make (in China). Now you just need to convince rabbitrampage to make more of them…

http://www.geekologie.com/2009/07/cuuuuuuute_felt_playstation_ip.php

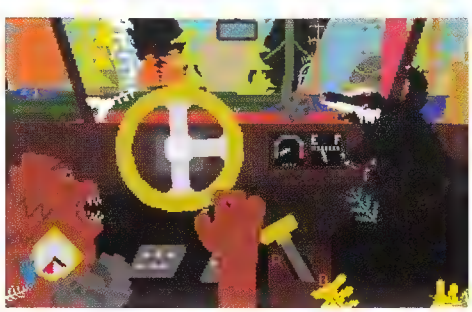
Evacuation

The airlock puzzler Evacuation, in which the goal is to eject aliens by opening and closing color-coded airlock doors (while trying not to eject your own crew) has been released for iPhone, for the low, low price of 99 cents. Probably worth it for the art alone.

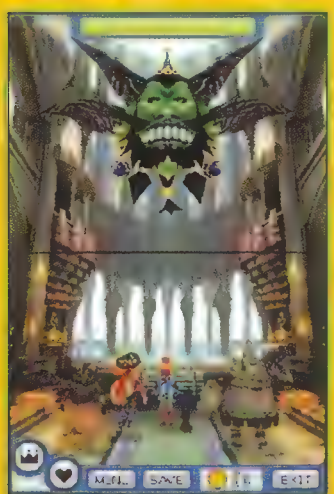


Enviro-Bear 2010

Enviro-Bear 2010 is the most absurd thing to come to iPhone in recent memory: essentially, it's a *barely* playable game in which you are a bear driving a car, and are given five minutes to fatten yourself up and drive to your cave in preparation for winter. The controls are ridiculously (and intentionally) awful, allowing you to use only one free paw to simultaneously drive and eat. It's oddly deep (you can drown in snow after growing an afro and having a rock hold the gas down while a badger is in your car, for example), making it possibly the best intentionally shit game we've ever played.



YOU'RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE.



You're off to see the Wizard — and a world full of other colorful characters, all rendered with stunning visuals, cinematic moments and stirring music.

Journey to the land of OZ, in a completely new, totally twisted take on the classic story.

You and your companions will discover the dangers and adventures beyond the yellow brick road.

Prepare to be blown away (you and your little dog, too).

Control everything with just the stylus! Use the innovative "trackball" to control speed and direction, or tap on-screen buttons to attack, use items and more.

Select easy-to-use, one-touch commands to make quick work of battles, or customize controls and seek out hidden bosses for greater challenge.

NINTENDO DS™

www.wizardofozds.com

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EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Mild Fantasy Violence

romeo_check_fail

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

Anything the game can present—visuals, audio, force feedback—that can effect a player response, has meaning.

Hang on a minute. Bear with me and read slowly. This is going to get annoying if I don't coin a few terms here. I'm afraid this will become a habit from here on. Comes with the territory.

We've talked about the grammar of game design, and how it's based in the concept that videogames serve to study—that being cause-and-effect. Then we talked about how, whether you intend it or want it or not, in context any given causal construct (say, the player's ability to die) carries both a mechanical and a psychological component. The same way that every shot in a film carries meaning, even if it's accidental or detrimental to what you're actually trying to say.

This is a simple idea that takes up so many words that it feels complicated. So instead of talking about "causal constructs" and explaining myself every time, I'll talk about *pongs*, and give you a footnote and a reference back to this article. Let's see how this goes.

So as we were saying, every pong has a yin and a yang. As every language serves to communicate, the objective serves to facilitate the subjective—much as English grammar helps to structure and pace the content of a sentence, and a word carries not just a definition but a contextual implication. Is it important that the player can die? Okay, then why? How does it reflect on the themes and ideas and perspective you're trying to get across? If you're reinventing a classic arcade game, death will probably play a big role—yet note how differently Pac-Man Championship Edition skews death. I'm not going to break it down; just go and think about it.

By meticulously choosing your mechanics with an eye toward psychology, in theory you (as a hypothetical game designer) can manipulate the player into whatever mental state you want. As players take an active part in their own manipulation, in the abstract videogames should have an even easier time of it than film—a passive medium, yet much like videogames a "push" medium.

That's in theory. Here on Earth, videogames, as a medium, aren't as refined as people like to pretend they are, which makes any attempt at a high-level discussion a bit of a fake-out, the bits that "aren't there yet" obscured by sleight of hand. Usually, poorly.

The problem is, we've got a communications bottleneck. And just about everyone pretends it's not there. This is really, really bad.

Where the medium is right now, a game can only account for and intelligently respond to so many behaviors, and a player has only so many (usually blunt) ways to behave. Why do so many games revolve around running, jumping, and shooting? Well, that's about the extent of our available bandwidth.

However many buttons you throw on a gamepad, they're just on/off switches. Even analog control is just a dimmer switch. More buttons don't, and can't, lead to greater nuance or ambiguity; all they lead to is more confusion, both for the player and for the game designer. Not only must the player learn the implications of every move in every feasible circumstance; the designer has to account for the player's every "ping" with an appropriate pong.

Just generally speaking—bottleneck aside—the more variables you add to a game, the harder it is to keep track of all the potential ramifications, and thereby the harder it is to paint a complete and cohesive experience for the player. The more variables you include that do not strictly enforce your message, the more you dilute it, making your game all the less focused.

Even if your every pong is relevant, should you fail to follow through and account for every ping, your verisimilitude is going to suffer. The first time the game fails to respond as the player expects, it ceases to be "real;" the player's belief falters, and the game becomes a jaded exercise in compulsion: pressing buttons, following story, for the sake of doing so.

The bottleneck only makes things worse. The less meaningful communication that's going on, the harder it is for the developer to make use of any given element in a meaningful way—so the more extraneous any given element will tend to be, which creates dissonance for the player by diluting the message, thereby creating discrepancies between what the player expects either on the basis of established in-game rules or on the basis of external expectations that the player has carried in, which are then triggered by the useless ornaments.

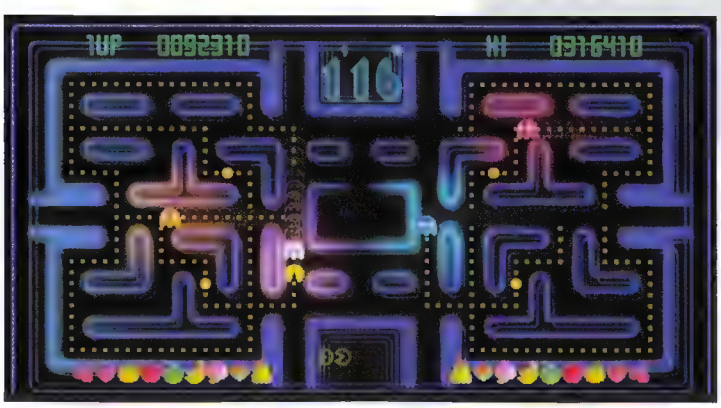
You may have noticed how many people assert that old games—from, say, 1980 through 1995—are objectively better than new games. There is a reason that goes beyond nostalgia: the simpler the game, the more cohesive the experience tends to be. By acknowledging the bottleneck, and setting technical expectations low, you reap the benefit of super-saturated significance.

Despite this recent explosion in complexity, the bottleneck hasn't really widened at all in the last twenty-five years because, generally speaking, developers and players aren't doing anything differently. You've got basically the same facile action verbs—run, jump, shoot—and a world that responds to those verbs in basically the same predefined way as Super Mario Bros.

Granted, compared to 1985 we've got some new verbs in our vocabulary, and—thanks in part to shoulder buttons—some adverbs. Although it's yet to really do anything interesting, we've got motion control and force feedback and custom controllers. And we've got dynamic physics and AI, to take away some of the workload of deciding every possible pong in a 3D environment. And that's all nice, I guess, but it's just decorating the same tree. If anything, it's distracting by making contemporary design feel more sophisticated than it is. This diverts attention from the communications failures at the heart of modern design, helping to keep us in this rut.

How do we fix the bottleneck? I'm not that clever. Something will come along when it has to. That's not the point; the bottleneck is there, it's a fact, so we have to deal with it. When we do that, and understand just how little wiggle room we have for communication, we can bend those limitations to our advantage.

The holy grail of design as we know it today? Overloading the functions. Understanding the implications of every pong, choosing your pongs wisely, and then steeping each pong in ramifications. Why imply one thing when you can imply eight? And whee, am I ever setting myself up for a fall next chapter. play



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Command your forces into one of several formations, each with its own strengths and weaknesses.

Trade items with your friends or battle them for fame and glory!

HERO'S SAGA

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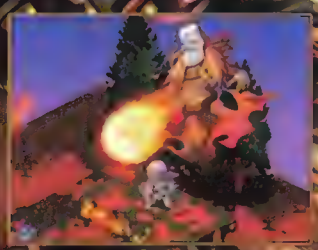

Collect over 180 Vaettir Arms and unleash the awesome power of the Valhalla Break!

When a strange girl hands Ernesto, the young prince of Valencia, a mysterious sword and tells him to save his friends, he thinks nothing of using the magical blade to fight off an undead attack. Little does he know that such a small choice will spark a war that will rage across the continent of Yulamecca and beyond...

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TEEN
T
Mild Fantasy Violence
Mild Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING
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NINTENDO DS.

GungHo Works

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System: Wii **Developer:** Cing and Town Factory **Publisher:** XSeed Games **Available:** Now

Little King's Story

Meet the Author of This Little Story

words Heather Anne Campbell

We continued a conversation we started on Christmas in 2007.

Kimura Yoshiro: Heather, Heather, Heather!

Heather Anne Campbell: Kimura-san! How have you been?
Kimura: How have I been?

Busy?
Kimura: Yes, busy, and, uh...making video games is so hard. I was not living in Tokyo for the past year. I went to Fukuoka, working with various people, telling them, I work for the producer of Little King's Story. I'm the director. I command you, "Make my video-game!" *(laughter all around).* Is there anything here at E3 that you wanted to see?

I was really hoping to see The Last Guardian, but it's just a trailer. And there's the other game, Ghostwire, by this Swedish developer, that lets you see ghosts in your room with the DSi camera, but it's not here, either.
Kimura: Really? Your own room?

Yes!
Kimura: *(laughs)*

Keep your eyes peeled!
Kimura: How many years have you worked as a writer about video games?

A little more than three.
Kimura: Before this, what were you?

Uh, I was...a comedian, in Europe.
Kimura: A comedian!? I believe it!

I worked in Amsterdam, and lived there for three years. Sketch comedy, not like stand-up. I moved to LA to be a comedian, and ended up being a video-game journalist.
Kimura: *(laughs)* I have a confession.

While I was working for Square, I was twenty-five years old, and still, I was acting in Tokyo. I did a show by myself, all alone. I did a one-man show!

Okay!
Kimura: I was an actor.

***(gasps)* Really!?**
Kimura: While I was working for Square, I was twenty-five years old, and still, I was acting in Tokyo. I did a show by myself, all alone. I did a one-man show! I took my show in front of an audience at few small places, a long time ago.

Can I write about that?
Kimura: Yeah, sure!

What was the show about?
Kimura: I said I was a film producer, and did the show. I never lost money! But eventually, I met people who loved video-games, and I loved video-games, and I could use my ability to write stories, and I assembled a team from the Japanese video-game scene from many years ago, from Square, from Capcom, various people—a small team of about ten people.
Translator: Alright, we can move into the other room for the official interview now.

Okay, time to get *official*, now. So, Little King's Story. Before we begin, the game came out in Europe already; have there been any changes for the American release?
Kimura: Well, I've heard that American gamers really like greater difficulty, so there's a new Hell Mode.

***Great*. Before this, you worked on Chulip; what was the journey from that game to Little King's Story? How did it come about?**
Kimura: Well, I worked with Wada-san *(Yasuhiro Wada, Creator of Harvest Moon)* on Chulip, and Little King's Story, and we got together and wanted to make the same type of, not only weird, but better game that people actually play.

If Chulip was born of a desire to see more affection in society, what is the motivation behind Little King's Story?
Kimura: Well, this game is about who or what is noble. Here, you have a boy who is a king, but later on you'll be able to go against seven different kingdoms, and each of those kings has a different—they think differently about what being good or being noble is. There's a kingdom where whoever can drink the most is considered noble. So, it's asking, is being a president noble? That's the basic question.
In Chulip, the characters in the game were based on my friends and neighbors. The thing is, they were all drunk.

***(laughs)* So, this is the game?**

Kimura: Yes, the kingdom here is actually pretty big.

Walk us through it. You start the game with a field ...
Kimura: Yes, in the beginning, you're in a little field.

What's your favorite class of character?
Kimura: Carefree adult.

***(laughs)* I believe it.**
Kimura: But in terms of the game-play, the class that I like most is the hardworking farmer. In the beginning, there are just carefree adults; they just want to sing and dance. When you meet them, they don't want to work, they just want to have fun. But using the scepter, I can take control of them, and give them tasks.

At any time during development, did you wish that you owned a magic crown that would make people do what you wanted?
Kimura: Actually, because I'm so demanding, a lot of the development team would say, "I see a crown on your head."

How large was the development team?
Kimura: Close to thirty.

And you worked with Yoko Shimomura, the composer from Kingdom Hearts.
Kimura: Yes, she composed the version of Boléro for the opening credits.

...in terms of the game-play, the class that I like most is the hardworking farmer.

When you're working on a new game, what films or books do you draw your inspiration from? Not that this isn't a completely original game...
Kimura: There are a lot, but I was actually inspired by The Little Prince for this game.

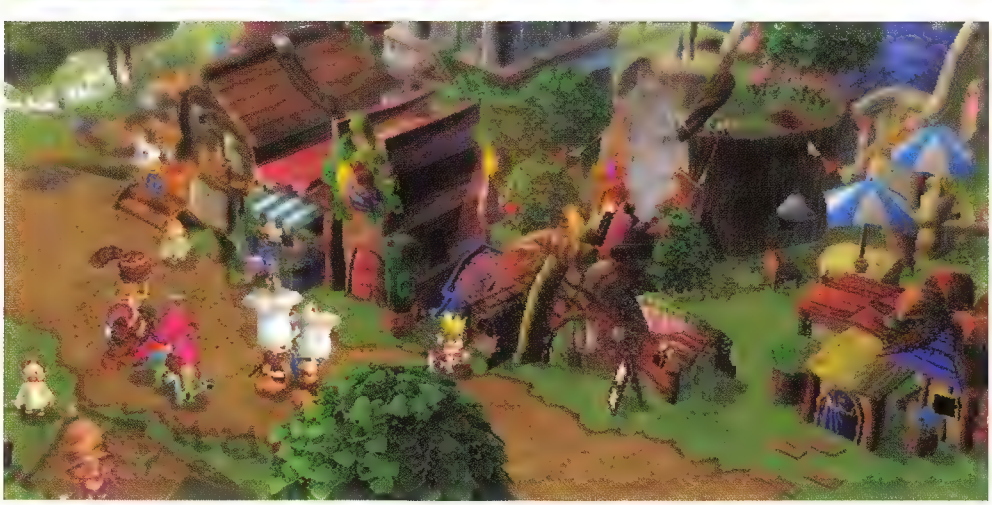
Do you find yourself drawn to this cartoon-ish aesthetic, or do you wish to do a darker game in the future?
Kimura: I do like really dark stuff, but the reason I went with a cute look is because they do say a lot of really dark comments. You'll run into people who look like children, but they say things like, "I don't know if I'm living my life the right way," you know, these kind of adult concerns. There's a day and night cycle in the game, and in the morning, everyone is happy. It's the start of a new day, so everyone is happy. And in the middle of the day, everyone is working ... except for the carefree adults. At night time, everyone goes to sleep. But once in a while, you'll see a guy who is walking. He'll have a music note above his head, and he's humming. And all the music that they hum is all classical music.

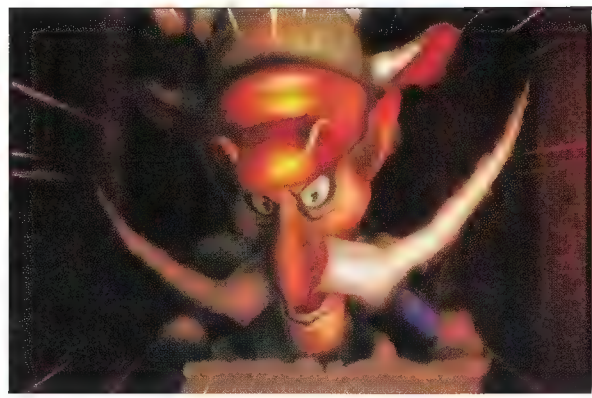
(Kimura-san begins to hum Beethoven to demonstrate).

That's pretty good! Are there different events for day and night cycles?
Kimura: Yes, the enemies will get stronger, but also you'll see these humming people. There's 20 songs that they can hum!

All the music in the game is classical?
Kimura: It's all classical music, except for one theme called TV Dinner, for the TV country. We arranged the song Rhapsody in Blue, by Gershwin.

Do these other countries represent real countries, a little bit?
Kimura: I wouldn't say countries, but I do have friends all around the world, from travelling, and they're based on them. I based all the kings and kingdoms according to my friends that were around the world. They're Russian, German...but they're my friends, and I got the inspiration from them.





Do these friends know?
Kimura: I did it secretly. I did not tell them. If I did, they might be mad!

And the game can be beaten, right? It's not like The Sims, where you just continue ...
Kimura: If you just played the game straight through, and tried to finish it, you could probably finish it in 15 hours. But there's a bunch of side-stories that you can do, and if you do all that, it's probably 30-40 hours. The final boss is very strong, and you'll be surprised at who is the final boss. Or rather, *what* is the final boss?

And the whole game was developed in two years?
Kimura: The prototype took about one year, and the actual game was about two years.

When you spend two years making a game, and it can be beaten in fifteen hours, do you find yourself wishing it were longer?
Kimura: No, no. I'd rather make it a solid title that people can enjoy. I think it's sad when people can play the game forever, but not remember what the game was about.

So, your goal as a game-maker is memorable moments? If so, how do you achieve that effect, making a moment that resonates with the player?
Kimura: I make the game strange!

(laughs)
Kimura: You know, I love classical music. When I'm writing, or drawing, I listen to classical music. *(Kimura-san brings out his notebook, and shows the drawings that he makes when thinking of his projects.)*

These are amazing! May I take a picture of it, for the magazine?
Kimura: Sure!

Who is your favorite composer? hat's your favorite piece?
Kimura: I like Gershwin, but...um...oh, whenever someone asks me, I forget the name of the composer! I could say Beethoven, but...that's not it. Um...well, anyway, Bolero is something I've liked for a long time. *(Kimura-san begins humming through Bolero, Heather joins).* I like your singing! When most people think of classical music, they think it's boring. But like you just did, it's fun. How you sing it, that's how the people at night-time sing it in the game.

So, with this game almost out, what is the theme of your next project? What are you working on next?
Kimura: Seriously?

Yes.
Kimura: Arabian King's Story. Seriously. Something in the desert, and the king is riding on a camel And it's because recently ... I have a lot of Arab friends! play

System: Wii **Developer:** Vanillaware **Publisher:** Ignition Ent. **Available:** Aug. 25

MURAMASA THE DEMON BLADE

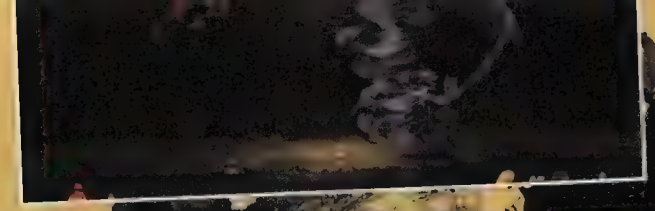
2D OR NOT 2D. THERE IS NO QUESTION

WORDS DAVE HALVERSON

As vivid and full of life as the visuals that have made it one of the most sought after Wii titles of the year, Muramasa: The Demon Blade is as rooted in Japanese mythology and provocative gameplay as it is sublime imagery; and given the level of visual grandeur Vanillaware has emanating from the Wii, that's a statement I don't make lightly. As a student of side-scrolling, it takes a lot to impress me, and a veritable masterpiece to engage me on the level I'd become accustomed to in the days of my youth. The years spanning the 16-, 32-, and 64-bit eras were replete with a steady flow of precedent-setting side scrollers, building on the 8-bit foundation shaped by companies like Capcom, Konami and Nintendo. Revenge of Shinobi, ActRaiser, Super Metroid, Strider, Castlevania IV and Bloodlines, Gunstar and Guardian Heroes, Ranger X, Earthworm Jim, Mischief Makers, Silhouette Mirage, Astal, Clockwork Knight… the list goes on and on. At the time "Generations" weren't determined by new hardware, but each passing 12 to 18-month cycle. No matter how epic a game you were playing, there were always a handful in the pipeline promising to do it that much better. And then just as the genre reached its apex with Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, 3D broke through in all of its crude blocky glory— the disco to our rock 'n' roll, and everything changed, practically overnight. Unlike disco, however, which will suck for eternity, 3D slowly evolved and got better. Since Tomb Raider broke the polygonal ice, there's been a steady stream of benchmark 3D titles, although precious few have shined as brightly as Symphony did for its time. Then in 2007, something unexpected happened. It had been years since I abandoned all hope that Vanillaware's Princess Crown—originally released for the Sega Saturn in Japan in 1997—would ever materialize in the states, so I could hardly believe my eyes the first time I saw Odin Sphere. Vanillaware had finally broken through in the states—albeit on PS2 a year and a half into the "next-generation" (an expression I vow to never utter again)—and side-scrolling, it seemed, would have at least one more hurrah.

I can't say whether or not the success of Odin Sphere, which we helped put on the map, affected the mounting 2D resurgence, although it certainly played a significant role in Vanillaware's decision to create the game before you—their third in the spirit of Princess Crown.

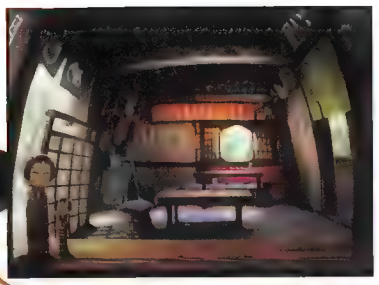
As The Demon Blade gets underway, you're directed to select your difficulty level between Muso (easy) or Shura (normal), and I'm told there's a death mode stuffed in here somewhere. I don't usually comment on difficulty settings, but in this case it makes a significant difference in your gameplay experience. Muramasa's determining feature is its simple, intuitive, fast-paced battle system. Set on Muso, you'll get a good taste of it but to get the most out of Vanillaware's Edo period devils, deities, and derelicts that seemingly come alive on screen, you need to clear out some of the 3D cobwebs and channel your inner twitch-gamer. It's a much more tactical game on Shura. Choosing which character/story to tackle first between Momohime (Pandemonium of the Demon Blade) and Kisuke (Ninja scroll of the Demon Blade) is a much more difficult proposition. While the two tales do cross paths, they're completely unique to one another, with Kisuke's being the more straightforward, at least initially. With no idea who he is, let alone what he's done to provoke such wanton retribution—a giant Ninja with shuriken the size of truck tires tries to frappe him at the outset—Kisuke accepts a "Muramasa" out of pure necessity (his own survival). Momohime's plight, on the other hand, begins on a much more somber note when she finds herself outside of herself. After shielding her fiancé, a prominent Yagyu swordsman, from would-be body snatcher Jinkuru, who planned on assuming his identity and abusing his power, she should be torn to shreds, but she appears to be fine, except for the unholy spirit that's taken up residence in her body. By interrupting Jinkuru's Oboro Soul Transfer Art, she leaves him no



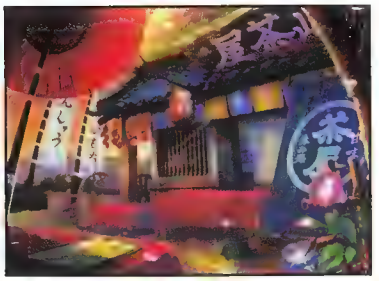
For every Muramasa gained in battle, another barrier will fall.

Kisuke and Momohime: their destinies are in your hands.

BACKGROUNDS

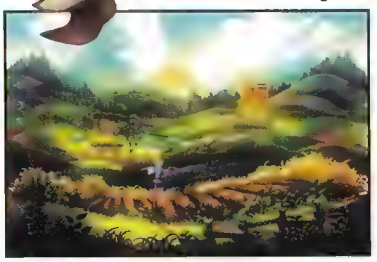


Soba Shops offer a wealth of delicacies to replenish your Life Flame and boost your Spirit.



Heed the words of the Teahouse Lady on the road to Owari and enjoy some tasty Mizu-yokan while passing through Mikawa.

Below: The beautiful rolling plains on the left, over which the shadows of clouds roll into the foreground, are comprised of 10 separate scrolling layers of art. Below right: You can take the path or scamper across the shallow water collecting souls before crossing the bridge.

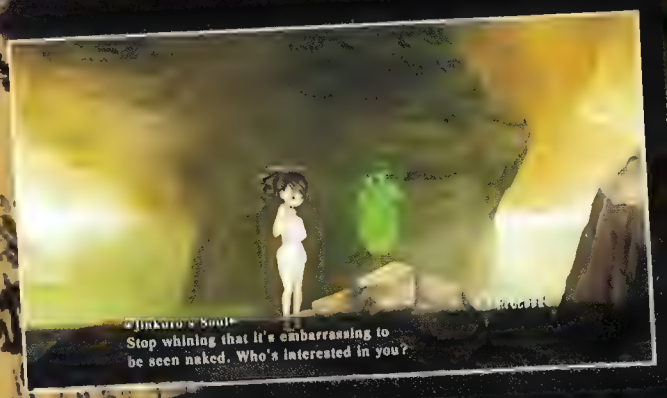


YOU'D BE HARD-PRESSED TO FIND A MORE CAPTIVATING AND ALTOGETHER ABSORBING BIT OF STORYTELLING...

choice but to possess her body instead, until he can find a more suitable host. Regardless of the path you choose, both stories unfold and end completely unique to one another. Certain characters intersect indirectly, but outside of the odd family tie or hot spring encounter, The Demon Blade consists of two entirely unique, equally captivating, and altogether eloquent parables bound only by the chaos that surrounds the Demon Blades.

Spoken in the original Japanese with English subtitles, you'd be hard pressed to find a more captivating and altogether absorbing bit of storytelling in all of gaming. All the bleeding edge engine tech, motion capture, and quasi-realistic facial animation money can buy doesn't hold a candle to the elegant simplicity of Vanillaware's superbly hand-drawn characters waxing mythological amid a Symphony of the Night-quality original score. It's rare that we come across such a thoughtfully written and beautifully spoken period piece, let alone one rooted in the Golden Age of Japan's Edo Period, set among some of the most breathtaking artistry in the history of video games.

As beautiful as Muramasa looks in screen shots and trailers, you simply can't grasp or appreciate how truly magnificent it is until you see it running in composite video on a quality flat screen. I've always maintained that 3D characters, no matter how sophisticated, by and large don't measure up to the hand-drawn equivalent, and with The Demon Blade Vanillaware puts their money where my mouth is. Even at 480p, there isn't a game out there that can touch Muramasa. OK, Bayonetta maybe, but nothing in 2D. As superb as the character and world illustrations are, along with the animation (Kisuke's scarf is hypnotic), there are other factors at work here too, that seem to go well beyond the boundaries of traditional 2D. The way Vanillaware color their backgrounds and apply the collision for Kisuke and Momohime produces an uncanny sense of 3D. The tops of rock formations and ledges, and the trunks of certain trees are obviously painted, yet look rendered in 3D; then to drive it home they simulate cloud cover floating across the (vertical,



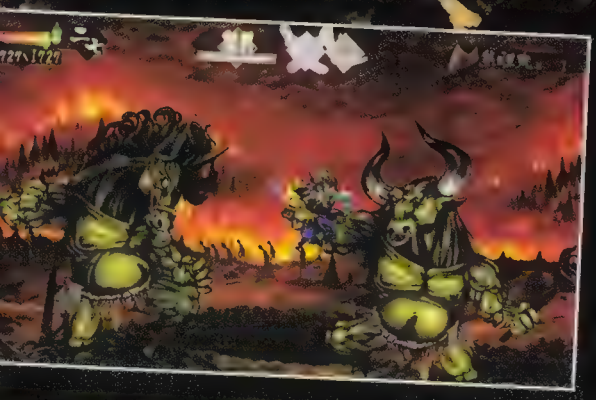
flat) plains, not horizontally, but moving towards the foreground among 10 separate layers of parallax. The end result is like nothing you've ever seen in 2D. This is your Wii on Vanillaware; 3D is so 5 minutes ago. There's also a pliable, flexible nature to certain plants, Oni, and especially food items, that seems to breach the laws of hand-drawn visuals. The more I play Muramasa, and I honestly can't stop, the more awestruck by the rampant detail I become. Vanillaware don't simply cut-out, animate, and layer rows of tall grass and ferns, they draw and animate each strand individually, and whatever technique they're using to create the shore breaks and rivers, color me dumbfounded, and the raging sea vignettes that breath life into Edo-period woodblock printing…we really and truly aren't worthy.

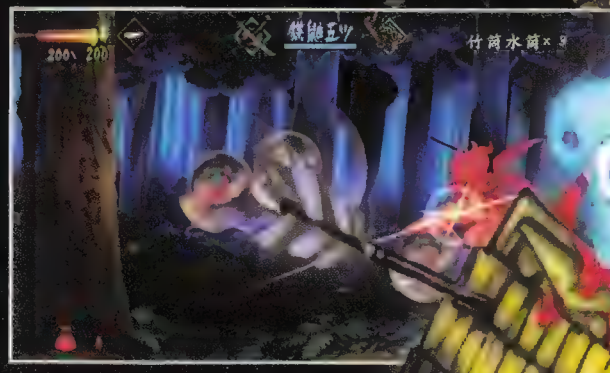
With so much going into the visual presentation, you wouldn't expect the gameplay to veer too far from the conventional side-scrolling formula, but of course, it does. Ostensibly an RPG that trades walk/fight map grinding for side scrolling sprints across breathtaking scenery interrupted by seamless real-time battles, Vanillaware has managed to breathe new life into two categories at once. As you dart across each province or Netherworld location—made up of a series of seamlessly connected disproportionate "rooms" similar to Super Metroid or post Symphony Castlevanias—your character automatically draws his or her blade and enters Battle Mode whenever the enemy appears; otherwise you're limited to running, jumping and hovering, all handled by the Nunchuk analog wand and so responsive and silky smooth it's more like gliding than running.

Shifting into Battle Mode, it's amazing how such simple controls can be so nuanced and altogether fun and addicting.

In the crouched position simply pressing A performs a low slash (the only way to strike fallen enemies when they're down), holding and releasing A produces a wicked drawn back slash (perfect for breaking Samurai swords), and pressing left or right elicits a cool rolling evade. Holding down A produces another quiver of nimble attacks: Press up on the analog for an uppercut, flick it left or right for up to three consecutive air slashes or within any jump or descent flick down for a powerful downward slam. As long as you're holding A in the air or on the ground you're automatically blocking too, so aside from straight slashing (repeatedly hitting A produces a simple slashing combo) and repelling projectiles (via perfectly timed slashes) the essence of the gameplay is flicking your character up, down, and across the screen at lightning speed, mixed with air and ground slashing. But let us not forget Muramasa is also an RPG, so we get a bevy of RPG elements too, that are anything but vanilla. Each character can hold and cycle up to three Muramasa Blades at a time, each with a Secret Art concealed within. You can also forge your own Blades using the souls of fallen opponents and Spirit gained by eating food in juxtaposition with the Blade Linage Tree.

Giant centipede attack the Ninja Base in Iga, courtesy of Kisuke's Muramasa.





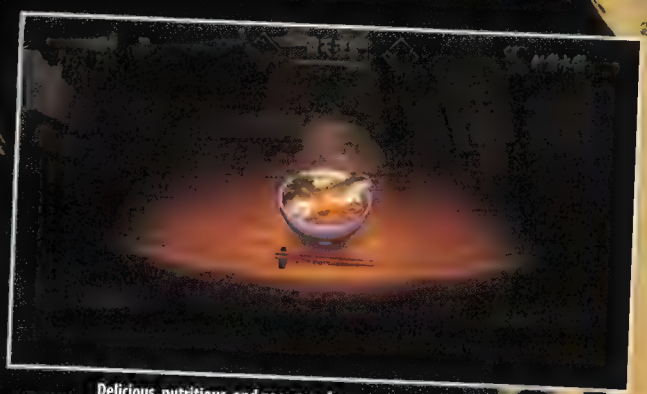
Foxy Ladies

Izuruha grants Kisuke a Muramasa under the condition that he gives her the souls it collects, so her kinsfolk can use the flames of the souls' wrath to forge new blades and fulfill their oath to the Muramasa. Demon Blades could not be made without this fire.

Kongitsu gives Jinkuru the Okina Mask that holds the spirit of the Swordsmith Senji Muramasa of Seishu. The spite from the souls Momohime Jinkuru collects give Muramasa the strength to forge the blades Jinkuru needs to show his Oboro Transfer style.

CHARACTERS

THE MURAMASA BLADES ARE LIKE CHARACTERS IN THE GAME...



Delicious, nutritious, and necessary for forging new Muramasas. Dig in!

The spirit of Senji Muramasa of the Kuwana Forge is with you every step of the way, more than happy to feed your bloodlust with his cursed Blades. It is his profound fate to live between worlds striking steel without end.

Your Blades derive power from the souls you collect fighting and traversing each province, which are stored in the Soul Power gauge. Using Secret Arts—special moves triggered with B—and repelling attacks drains the gauge and weakens your drawn Blade, which will eventually break unless you switch to a fresh Blade before it gets too low. Once a Blade breaks, sheathing it gradually restores its power and when the gauge is full you can perform a Quick Draw attack damaging everything on screen. The Muramasa Blades are like characters in the game. Each time you defeat a key adversary you're awarded a new blade capable of penetrating whatever color holy barrier stands between you and the next chapter in the game. Doing battle against Muramasa's formidable foes—a collection of deities, demons, and characters of lore that are truly second to none, the tactics constantly change relative to the story and region, and size doesn't necessarily always matter. If there's one thing Vanillaware knows, it's how to keep things moving and fresh.

Scattered throughout the ever-changing, ever-beautiful, ever-perilous landscape, small villages offer a temporary reprieve from the rigors of battle. Depending on how well you fight—every battle in Muramasa counts and every opponent has a specific strength and weakness—you're awarded XP (gotta level up to carry and equip all those nasty Muramasas) and Mon (money) to use in various restaurants (Soba Shops) and to buy various recovery items, accessories, and culinary tips from Peddlers. You can also find "treasure" by looking for the glint in any room marked with a basket on the area map, which you can display in real-time anytime. Restaurant food comes out steaming hot and painstakingly modeled and animated. Press A once and pick up the chopsticks, press it again and Kisuke or Momohime take a bite…hold it down and eat fast or savor every bite. Unlike other games where food is perceived, eating in Muramasa is supported by a traditional Edo period menu, beautiful art and animation and compliments to the chef. Order the sea urchin sushi and watch as each separate, pliable piece is dipped in sauce, bitten into, and slowly devoured. Depending on what you order, food not only restores your Life-Flame (energy gauge) but also provides Spirit used for forging new Muramasa Blades. Still, stuffing your face at the Soba Shop and using store bought remedies and libations will only take you so far. Muramasa's RPG-length treks, often times spanning several provinces, become increasingly taxing as each plot thickens, and there are no restaurants in heaven or hell, so sometimes you need to cook. By killing Boar and Pheasant, and stocking up on ingredients and Culinary Tips, Kisuke and Momohime can either Grill or Hot Pot Cook meals on the go. Hot Pot Cooking is especially beneficial as it's often accompanied by temporary Power or Strength Boosts, and foods such as Rice Balls can be assigned to the "Item Shortcut" list for ultra-easy access in battle via the cross-pad.

There isn't a single aspect or element in Muramasa that hasn't been thoroughly thought through and honed to Vanillaware perfection. This is truly one for the ages on the level of a Symphony of the Night or Super Metroid. You don't merely play it; you become mesmerized by it, sinking deeper and deeper into its storybook allure, pausing only to ogle its immense beauty and take in its spellbinding score.

Vanillaware epitomizes the kind of small independent studios distinguished by their signature styles that have been a staple of Japanese game creation for going on two decades. Of the few that remain viable for the sheer magnificence of their games, Vanillaware exists in that exalted space with the likes of Treasure; among the most precious commodities in all of gaming. Not only do they represent one of the last bastions of hand-drawn gaming, but they also happen to be the Pixar of the strain. Few have ever, or likely will ever, do it better, and it's a kind of magic that 3D, no matter how glossy, can never achieve. Once the tastemakers for gaming proper, that they've become less influential in the wake of gaming's ongoing commercialization and love affair with realistic violence makes them all the more essential as we usher in the next generation of gamers. It won't be long before this generation's median-age males move on or Twitter themselves into a comatose state, after which we're going to need more games like Muramasa, because something tells me the next generation won't be nearly as trigger (or Twitter) happy.

parting shot

INTERVIEW

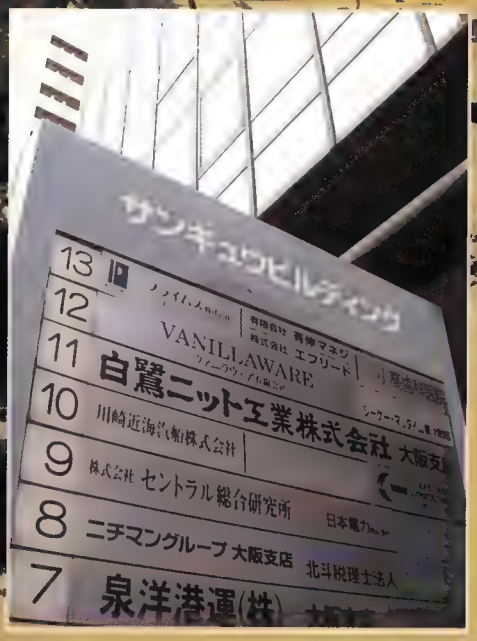
GEORGE KAMITANI
DIRECTOR

YOSHIO NISHIMURA...
LEAD DESIGNER

INTERVIEW BY DAI KOHAMA AND NICK DES BARRES

TRANSCRIBED BY DAI KOHAMA

TRANSLATED BY NICK DES BARRES



play: Thank you so much for your time today. To begin, Mr. Kamitani, even as far back as your time at Capcom your work has been European-style high fantasy. Why did you want to do something Japonesque?
George Kamitani: To be blunt, it was tough coming up with new fantasy concepts (laughs). My ideas were starting to run out, so I wanted to try something different rather than go right into more European fantasy. On Odin Sphere, I was told it was a weak action game. I heard it all the time—it just wasn't any fun. I made Odin with the intention of it being an RPG, but if gamers play it as an action game, it's going to be an action game to them, right? I wanted to make my next game work well as straight action, and the ninja idea matched that concept.

Was it a recent idea, or have you wanted to do a Japanese-style game for a while?
GK: For a while. I wanted to make something like The Legend of Kage (laughs)... or...

...Gempei Toumaden? (ed. note—a 1986 Namco side-scroller with a similar medieval Japanese horror aesthetic)
GK: Yeah! I loved that game too.

I know you like to have a strong thematic structure for your games. For Odin it was Norse myth, the Wagnerian opera that evolved from that... would you say Muramasa is informed by kabuki? Rakugo?
GK: It was difficult finding the theme at first, actually. The first idea I had was Japanese TV dramas... we were consciously making something like *Mito Koumon (ed. note—an Edo-era drama running continuously on Japanese television since 1969)*. But I wanted something... stranger, you might say? Let's make it kabuki, I thought... or noh, or kyogen *(ed. note—various forms of traditional theater)*. Once that decision was made, I bought lots of scripts and started studying them.

Yoshio Nishimura: Which led to... problems...

GK: It made writing the story take a good year (laughs).

YN: The original plot was very funny, wasn't it? Almost comedic?

GK: Comedic... yeah, it was. It was like a popular TV drama at first, but when I started writing more unusual, historic dialogue I *really* got into it (laughs). Oh, by the way, I saw *Juuniya* yesterday *(ed. note—a kabuki adaptation of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night)*. It was great!

YN: I bet... wait, you just saw it *now*?

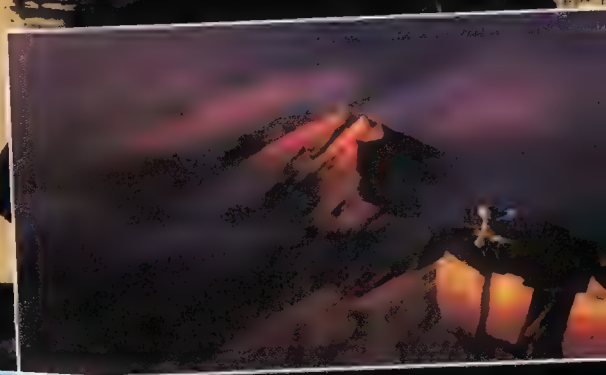
GK: Just now (laughs). Believe me, I wish I'd seen it when we were still making the game!

(All laugh)

Speaking of Japanese theater, there are countless references in the game that American players just won't get, like a character randomly afraid of manjuu bean cakes *(ed. note—a reference to the rakugo play Manjuu Kowai)*. Are those references remaining as-is?
GK: With Muramasa, I wasn't thinking about overseas audiences at all. Really, the first time I heard "Westerners like it!" was after TGS 2008. Up until then we were making it specifically for a Japanese audience, based on rakugo and kabuki. I was conscious of the fact that people overseas probably wouldn't understand it, though. It is The Legend of Kage, after all (laughs). The rakugo references are in there just because I like them.

YN: There are other references Japanese people will get, like *Oitekebori (ed. note—a well-known rakugo ghost story of the same name)*, but there are plenty that even

WHEN I STARTED WRITING MORE UNUSUAL, HISTORIC DIALOGUE, I REALLY GOT INTO IT...



the average Japanese person won't know. It's the same thing with the enemies, too... most people will know what a Rokurokubi or Ittan-Momen is on sight *(ed. note—traditional Japanese youkai, or demons)*, but not a lot of people will know what an Aobouzu is. I think there's something very attractive about that—the further you get into this game, the more fascinating things you'll find stuffed inside.

GK: I just put that stuff in there because I liked it.

YN: Is that all you have to say for yourself? (laughs)

GK: Sorry (laughs).

Was Muramasa based on any specific play?
GK: The original idea was to base it on *Chuushingura*, specifically the kabuki and bunraku version, *Kanadehon Chuushingura (ed. note—a famous story known as The Forty-Seven Ronin in English)*. But... um, there's not much of that left in Muramasa (laughs). At the beginning it was really a story about clashing houses, but now there's just a little stuff involving the character Torahime left from *Chuushingura*. Another kabuki play, *Sakurahime Azuma Bunshou*, was the base for a lot of Momohime's story.

I'm curious—who came first, Kisuke or Momohime?
GK: Production began with the intention of the game being part of the Princess Crown series, so Momohime was first. "Ninja Princess"...

YN: That was the development code name, wasn't it?

GK: I wrote the design doc with the notion that it would be "Princess Crown 3: Ninja Princess." We brought it to Sega first.

YN: Are you sure you want to mention that? (laughs)

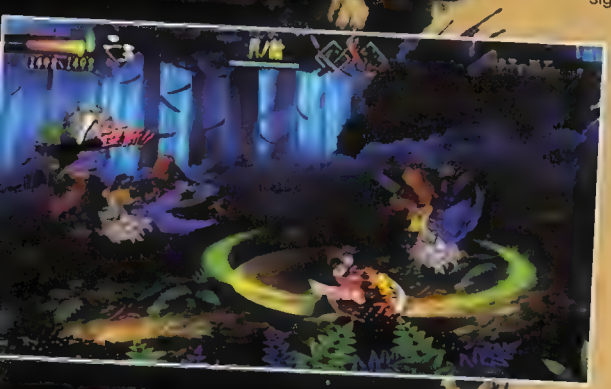
GK: Oh, I've mentioned it in other interviews... we took it to Sega and got turned down! (laughs) It was a situation where we were asked, "Will this sell one million copies?" and I had to answer, "Uh, I don't know about a million..." so it was like, "Then it isn't happening." We ran around everywhere looking for a publisher, and finally Marvelous picked us up. By the way, Atlus turned us down too! (laughs)

After the success of Odin Sphere?
GK: Atlus wanted me to do another fantasy game.

Was it always the plan to have a male ninja counterpart to the "Ninja Princess?"
GK: I was thinking several characters. To relate it to Princess Crown, the ninja princess would have been like Gradriel, with various characters surrounding her... like Gwendolyn and the other four heroes in Odin Sphere. I imagined Muramasa would be the same, but I knew the number of characters might vary based on the budget we got. In the end, our budget reduced the number to two!

(All laugh)

Kisuke and Momohime play almost identically. Was there a point during development when you were considering different sets of abilities?
GK: That's a budget issue too—first, I knew we wouldn't have time to make them play differently, nor would we have the time to balance them. Second, we started making both characters at the same time, so it made sense to give them the same func-



THE MEANING OF THE TWO DIF CULTIES WAS DIF CULT FOR EVEN OUR STAFF TO GRASP AT THE BEGINNING.

tions. The game has tons of different swords in it, so we decided to use those to express differences in skills and moves.

How did Muramasa end up with so many swords, anyway? Was it a chore coming up with all the special attacks?
GK: It's a pretty silly reason (laughs). A marketing person from Marvelous asked me, "How many swords will the game have? Is it something we could use for advertising?", and I told him, "Oh, more than a hundred. A hundred and eight!" 108 is the number of the *kleśaas (ed. note—Buddhism's earthly desires)*, so it just sounded cool (laughs). Of course, right after those words left my mouth, I thought, "Oh man, now we really have to do 108 of these!" At first, I thought there would be far fewer special attacks.

YN: That's true. Early on we thought the differences would be mainly names and attack power, but members of our staff were insistent that there be 108 different attacks for 108 different swords...

GK: During the last half of development, programmers were going off and making them on their own (laughs).

YN: They did an amazing job.

GK: Towards the end of development, I didn't have to specify anything about the swords! (laughs). You designed some too, didn't you?

YN: A few. We collected ideas from a lot of people, some very unique people. That's how we came up with 108 of them (laughs).

GK: During that last half of development, I was... not to change the subject, but I was completely occupied by the story. Even early this year, I was still changing things, so...

YN: What? I thought the story was totally done by last December. There were no major changes this year...

GK: Well, actually... (laughs). The game released in April in Japan, and the voice was recorded in February. I was writing dialogue right up to early February, then all the voice work was delivered later that month.

You were still working on the story two months before release?
GK: It just wasn't done. Last TGS... October, I guess... there were no endings yet. They didn't exist. I was standing by, watching people "location test" the game for us, writing the endings on my cell phone (laughs). It was a miracle the story got done.

YN: But hadn't most of the structure been done for a while? It's not as if the entire game was written in the last few months. The framework was there. It was just a matter of piecing all the parts together and smoothing out inconsistencies, like, "if we put this and this together, we have to rewrite this!" The characters were already fully fleshed out.

GK: And yet we wrote the script for the *onsen (ed. note—hot springs)* scenes first (laughs).

YN: That's true (laughs). There were logic problems with stringing it all together, even though we knew what each character would say, and how they would say it... the character traits were well-established. But because you were handling everything from direction, to design, to story, to being the main planner...

GK: Don't forget the day-to-day of being president (laughs).

YN: That too (laughs). You had taken all that on yourself, so the situation was really just a mess. But anyway, to follow up! Saying "last October," "this February" without qualifying it sounds pretty awful!

GK: I'm being honest—I really didn't think we'd make it. I wonder if I can say this now...? Marvelous told us we absolutely had to release it in the last fiscal year—by the end of March. But we told them it was impossible...

So it was delayed a couple weeks?
GK: No, Marvelous told us there were to be no delays, so we steeled ourselves for their anger and just kept working on the game in silence (laughs).

YN: That's not quite how it worked (laughs).

GK: Maybe not, but it really was a crazy schedule that made you want to throw up your hands and scream "help!" We got the voice work at the end of February, and managed to implement it by March 2. Debugging was happening at the same time, but the programming wasn't locked down yet, so...

Was debugging a nightmare?
GK: We used the specialty debugging firm Pole To Win, and it was really an awe-inspiring production. They had a huge amount of people living at the company, debugging 24 hours a day. We were utterly exhausted at the time, too.

YN: No kidding. It would have been nice if we had a little leeway, but the situation was "Do it! Deliver it! Check it! Lock it down!" so... most people who worked on Muramasa probably have some regrets. With that said, if we had more time, we probably would have kept adding more and more things, which would have introduced more and more bugs. Looking back, it may have ended at the perfect time. Everyone was at maximum voltage, so to speak—motivation was at its peak, so I think the "we have no choice but to finish" attitude really saved us. The producer, too... he doesn't visit much any more, but he was here every week back then, asking, "How's it doing? How's it doing?" I'm not surprised he was worried (laughs). In the end, we learned to speak frankly with each other. It felt like we were on the right track.

GK: True...

YN: It really was a miracle. Everyone was stunned it got done.

Were any additions or tweaks made to the US version, by the way?
YN: It does have a new feature, actually—the ability to warp from shrine to shrine around the map. We heard here in Japan that moving around the map after beating the game took an unnecessarily long amount of time, so you can now warp at shrines... or rather, by talking to Kongiku or Yuzuruha.

I wish I had that feature right now (laughs). I want to ask about the platform before we get any further—it's unusual for a Wii game to be controlled in an entirely traditional manner. Did your original plans for control change?
GK: Yes, completely. First we tried various implementations of motion control. Finding the answer to Wii remote usage from a gameplay perspective took about a year. On-screen reaction time for Wii motion control is slow, and it's easy to screw up. During our testing it was

always, "No! I didn't mean to do that!" This sort of thing made control very messy, and we reached the conclusion that nothing was better than a D-pad and buttons for precision control. In the end, we abandoned motion control entirely.

I remember the producer talking about "exhilarating remote slashing action" back when the game was first announced.
GK: "Remote slashing action!" That was just the producer talking. I asked him not to say anything like that, believe me (laughs).

YN: Well, at that stage, we still hadn't made a decision on motion control... but it's not really conducive to long-term action game play.

GK: There was a lot of arguing amongst the staff on that point. "People will think there's no reason for the game to be on the Wii!", "We *have* to use the remote!"... We didn't know how to address that until the very end of development.

YN: It's true that from about midway through development, we were thinking it was going to be Classic Controller all the way. But strangely enough, the final game is easiest to play with the Nunchuk—just letting your arms hang naturally. You don't have to hold your hands in a cramped position.

GK: You play it with your arms folded, don't you? (laughs)

YN: That's just how loose you can be with the D-pad and buttons separated.

So the official developer standpoint on the issue is, "Play Muramasa with the Nunchuk"?
GK: Definitely. Once we decided there would be no motion control at all, we started concentrating on how we could reduce the number of buttons we were using, tuning the action for just the Nunchuk.

ON WII YOU CAN SHIFT A LOT OF DATA QUICKLY, SO WE NEVER HAD TO MAKE THE PLAYER WAIT...

The level of detail in the backgrounds truly astounds.

Can you tell us about some of the motion control ideas that were considered, but abandoned?
GK: Well, one fun thing... I insisted that eating food in the game be done by holding the remote like a pair of chopsticks. Like this *(miming chopsticks)*, each bowl-to-mouth scooping motion would reduce the on-screen food a little more. But the remote was... a little heavy... (laughs).

(All laugh)

GK: "It's way heavier than a pair of chopsticks!" people told me...

Not to mention thicker!
GK: And thicker (laughs). Plus, people didn't want to mime chopsticks every single time they ate something in the game, so we dropped it.

Is that why the food is animated with such loving detail?
GK: They're not connected, actually. The food animation really reflects the passion of the designer in charge. I asked for cooking animation, and that's what came back!

YN: On Odin Sphere, we had the characters themselves eating... I think having the protagonists eat food that would logically exist in their world is great for establishing presence, but we decided we'd use a different perspective in Muramasa. Simply showing pictures of the dishes would have been boring, so... we asked the artist in charge, "Figure something out!" (laughs). You see how it turned out—he had an obsession with it! He's a fellow

here at Vanillaware named Shigatake, who also directed our DS game Kumatanchi *(ed. note—Japan only)*. Shigatake was the director, lead artist, character designer, and story writer on that game...

GK: He's a real one-man team (laughs). The reason we decided not to show the characters eating in Muramasa was another budget issue. You know the restaurant and teahouse interiors? They're actually designed so you can walk around in them, but the animators decided there was just no time to draw the player characters sitting down and eating. For a while, we thought we'd have to abandon the cooking system entirely. The restaurant interiors were going to be reduced to simple backgrounds... but when Shigatake finished Kumatanchi and re-joined our team, he asked how he could help. Immediately, I said "Food! Draw food!" (laughs). It was perfect, because he'd been off making Kumatanchi and didn't really know how the rest of the Muramasa team had put the game together. By letting him go crazy on an entire sectioned-off chunk of the animation himself... well, let's just say the results were spectacular (laughs). He finished early and did work on some NPCs, though.

YN: So many people were working on NPCs during the last half of development... it was sort of... a complete mess (laughs).

GK: I think we mastered the madness (laughs). But there really was tons of stuff already drawn that had to be cut... a lot of bosses. We had been holding back *youkai* like Nekomata, Kyuubi, outengu, and Jorougumo *(ed. note—all exceptionally well-known youkai)*.

YN: I remember the Jorougumo.

GK: We held them back because we knew we wanted to use them, but wound up with no time to implement the programming. In the end, we were left with pointless *youkai* like Keukegen (laughs).

YN: Keukegen... he's for the hardcore *youkai* aficionado (laughs).

GK: Keukegen was actually the very first character drawn for Muramasa. At the beginning our plans still weren't very solid, so we decided it would be least problematic to start drawing enemies that could go anywhere—enemies that wouldn't affect the story. The first things I had our staff animate were small enemies like Keukegen, or mid boss-type enemies like Nuppebou and Aobouzu. I never thought they'd turn out to be our marquee youkai (laughs).

The Nuppebou and Aobouzu were in the very first Famitsu article, weren't they?
GK: They were. By the way, Famitsu used 80% of everything we had completed in the game for that very first article. It was like, "Uh oh! What are we going to do for the next one?!" (laughs).

YN: We had nothing left to show (laughs).

Other than the abandoned motion control, was there anything you were able to accomplish on Wii that wouldn't have been possible on PS2?
GK: The biggest thing was loading. On Wii you can shift a lot of data quickly, so we never had to make the player wait. I know we put the player on hold an awful lot during Odin Sphere, so I think being able to play Muramasa without pauses is really important. Also, being able to store more textures was a big deal. I don't want to give too much away, but the last boss... unfortunately. Muramasa isn't a game with a camera that zooms in very much, so it can be hard to tell, but the resolution we were able to draw the last boss at is just incredible. That would have been impossible on Odin Sphere. If you look at that game closely, it's very blurry. Areas the player's eye would naturally be drawn to are sharp, but background elements are pretty indistinct. That always made me sad, but we were able to store pretty much everything we wanted in Muramasa.

YN: You could say that was thanks to the Wii. What else was good about the Wii environment... hmm. I guess the best thing was the greatly increased RAM. With 2D work, if you have to add an unanticipated new animation midway through development, it's not just a matter of a little 3D motion data. It's a LOT of data. Having the ability to add new patterns whenever we wanted gave me the impression that Wii was good hardware. Of course, other platforms have even more RAM, so yes, working on those would be even better—this is just in terms of comparing Wii with PS2. On that platform, we were barely scraping by even after taking out alpha channels... to reduce data, we had to lose alpha channels, and even *before* that reduce the size of the textures! We never had that concern on Wii.

I PERSONALLY FEEL MURAMASA HAS A VERY STRONG AESTHETIC BASE...

COVER BEHIND THE

The sensuous female form, embraced and mischievously tweaked by dozens of tentacles: A uniquely Japanese image that in recent years has become associated almost entirely with pornographic anime. Vanillaware's George Kamitani returns the classic motif to its slightly more savory origins on our cover this month, but from whence does it originate?

Edo-era Ukiyo-e (woodblock print) master Katsushika Hokusai is widely credited with having conceived the image in his landmark work Tako to Ama ("Octopuses and Pearl Diver," also known in English as The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife), produced for popular consumption around 1820. Despite a common misconception, the image does not depict rape; the comic-style dialogue written around the figures makes it clear that the young pearl diver is a willing, and enthusiastic, participant.

Extra trivia: Hokusai's masterwork The Great Wave off Kanagawa appears in Muramasa: The Demon Blade as a backdrop for the fishing mini-game.

Let's talk about gameplay. I know you wanted to make Muramasa more action-focused... what was the impetus for the RPG-style encounter system?
GK: No particularly deep reason... just the desire to carry over the traditional elements from Princess Crown. I had also worked on "belt flow" action games at Capcom, where the scrolling would stop and you were forced to fight to proceed. I don't think it's that unusual for an action game.

YN: Character motion is so fast in Muramasa that you can move between stages very quickly, so the screen lock with battles becoming like walls to overcome allows the player to feel like they're making progress. Otherwise, you could just run through everything. By controlling encounters, we can do internal turning for every single battle as well.

GK: On Odin Sphere we created a rigid growth ladder, but in the end each player does things differently. Some people would think it was straight action and would advance without leveling up, eventually hitting a wall. Others would build their characters up more than we expected, and were able to defeat bosses easily. The difference was dramatic, so we *really* put in the effort to balance it this time.

Did the dual difficulties make that more taxing? How did that idea come about?
GK: It was a matter of deciding what to do with the two modes, more than anything else. We argued about that until the end. In Muso mode, you automatically block if you're swinging your sword, right? You don't have to think about technique—you can just keep swinging forever, but the programmers argued that there was no risk there. We had the idea for Shura and Muso from the very beginning, but could never figure out where to draw the line between them. Eventually the time came where we had to say "Well, this will probably do."

YN: It wasn't a simple matter of dividing the game into "Easy" and "Hard." Making that kind of division is very different if you think seriously about pleasing both people who aren't good at action games, and those who would be bored by simple combat. That's where the Muso/Shura idea came from. What's "easy," what's "hard"? If you just do straight statistical differences, people who find the game difficult won't be able to win no matter how much they level up or prepare. On the other hand, seasoned action gamers might ignore all that, relying on skill. We weren't dealing with "Easy" and "Hard" here... the meaning of the two difficulties was difficult for even our staff to grasp at the beginning.

GK: There was a lot of unnecessary confusion with Odin Sphere. Was it an action game? Or an RPG? Fans of both genres were going to buy it. It was a love story, so we had a lot of female players, and they would say the game was very hard... yet they *were* able to make it to the end. This is because they were able to backtrack and level up—eventually they'd get strong enough to proceed. But action gamers don't want to grind. It's boring for them. They want to conquer the game as they are now, but since Odin was at its heart an RPG, that was literally impossible. Although the game was asking them to level up, they wouldn't eat any of the food, and wind up with wildly varying HP and attack power. In any case, when we started Muramasa we asked, "How can we please both groups?" The answer was two different styles. Broadly speaking, we wanted a mode for people who enjoyed RPGs, leveling up, and raising parameters slowly, then another for people who wanted the technical euphoria of an action game—you might die, but derive enjoyment from thinking, "Damn! If only I had done *that*!"

Are the mode names staying the same in the English version?
GK: Yes, Muso and Shura. Magazines often describe them as "Easy" and "Hard", but please point out in your article that it's not that simple (laughs).

Has anyone at Vanillaware actually beaten the hidden "Shigurui" mode, by the way? *(ed. note—"Death Craze," a word derived from the famous samurai "manual"* Hagakure*)*
YN: Yes, actually!

GK: Well, someone at Pole To Win was able to beat it (laughs).

WELL, IT'S A JAPANESE-STYLE GAME, SO I SIMPLY WANTED TO CONVEY THE BEAUTIFUL ASPECTS OF JAPAN, BUT...

YN: When we were told one of their testers beat it, it was like, "Oh, so it *is* doable?" (laughs)

GK: The on-screen text for the third mode does say "We can't guarantee this mode is beatable," but apparently there's a rule that you can't release an unbeatable game in Japan—we had to prove someone could actually do it. Not that *I* have (laughs).

YN: The swords are the key to playing that mode. There are brief invulnerability windows, so it's all about how you use them. Of course, player skill is a big element, but the most importing thing is using the swords' invulnerability effectively.

GK: I think it works pretty well as a game, because it's actually based on Muso mode—you automatically block if you're attacking. If you keep attacking, you can avoid the one-hit kills, but if your sword breaks, you're dead. As long as you keep switching swords, it's actually quite playable.

Moving on to the visuals, the thing that most impressed me compared to Odin Sphere was the sheer level of detail in the backgrounds. Can you tell us about the process of creating them?

GK: Well, it's a Japanese-style game, so I simply wanted to convey the beautiful aspects of Japan, but... Japanese colors are very faint. At the height of certain seasons you might see an intense red or yellow, but in general Japanese colors are extremely pale. And then there's the whole "beauty of nothingness" thing (laughs). The loveliness of an autumn sky is in its sheer emptiness. I didn't think it would be possible to communicate that kind of beauty by representing it directly, so first we studied the great *Nihonga* painters *(ed. note—traditional Japanese-style painting)*, like Kai'i Higashiyama and Gyokudou Kawai. We incorporated tons of Kanou school imagery *(ed. note—a famous 15th-18th century school of painting)*, particularly from the Rakuchuu rakugai zu genre of Kyoto screen paintings, as well as *sumi-e (ed. note—India ink painting)* and ukiyo-e *(ed. note—woodblock prints)*, the work of Hokusai... it's all in there. To be honest, people familiar with the art history of Japan will tell us, "You ripped everything off!" (laughs).

(All laugh)

YN: Not *exactly* the same imagery, but the sense of it. In terms of aesthetic feel, we humbly borrowed from a lot of artists. Of course, what shows up on screen is totally insignificant compared to the feel of the gold leaf on a real Kanou school *kinbyoubu* screen, or *sumi-e* painted on rice paper, so we added animation and effects of our own to compensate. I personally feel Muramasa has a very strong aesthetic base... the works we're borrowing from are almost too distinguished, too high-minded, to use as stepping stones. But precisely because we had that incredibly strong pedestal, we were able to exert all our efforts on animating them, adding little effects and touches. I knew the results would be wonderful... but to be blunt, it was very difficult.

How so?

YN: We had to re-examine the question, "What is the beauty of Japan?" I don't just mean that from an aesthetic perspective, but also cultural. On Odin Sphere it was more about the charming images you'd see in a children's book, or simply things we thought were cool, so it was easy enough to realize. But Muramasa is based on Japan, *made* by Japanese, so we aren't able to see what works and what doesn't. You really can't make those kinds of cultural-aesthetic judgments by yourself, so a big part of it was incorporating the work of great artists of the past, especially stuff we thought was good.

GK: Japanese style was... really rough.

YN: It was rough. It was *really* rough. It's because we know it so well... but do we really understand what makes these images great? For example, if I asked someone on staff to paint the *ultimate* sunset for a background, they have to consider what the best, ultimate sunset looks like to them. For an autumn forest scene, they might draw inspiration from one of Gyokudou Kawai's autumnal river scenes, something pale and beguiling like that. But just dropping a Kawai into the game wouldn't have any impact; it would start to make the

...ABOUT A YEAR. IT TOOK THAT LONG TO ND OUR CONTROL SCHEME.

entire work look over-elegant. Making those adjustments between faint and vivid were extremely difficult. The barriers we had to overcome were invisible ones, so it was endless trial and error. If it didn't work, we just scrapped what we were doing and started again.

The sunset you can see in the Hida mountain background really affected me. I grew up in the north of Japan, and it felt like I had seen that sunset before.
YN: Yes, that gentle, melting feeling... red dissolving softly into white.

It's the little touches that blow me away in Muramasa, like watching tiny animations playing out on a *byoubu* screen.
YN: That was almost an in-joke. We drew all that stuff, might as well animate it (laughs). Because Muramasa is a fantasy, there was no need to make things realistic. When considering *how* fantastical to go, we knew it would be a little sad if we didn't incorporate touches that would be surprising, but even so, most people aren't going to notice them. For instance... you know the scenes with all the Buddha statues? If you look *really* closely, they're breathing (laughs).

Whoa! I never noticed!
YN: We did some crazy things (laughs).

GK: I thought that was a little much, frankly (laughs).

YN: I realize putting things into a game people might not notice could be a problem, but at the same time... this may sound strange, but being open to noticing little touches like that requires a certain magnanimousness on the player's part, right? I just remember playing games as I was growing up, and being slack-jawed in wonder whenever I discovered one of those little touches. That's the kind of game I wanted to make. I've been experimenting with these tiny details in my work for a while... in Monster Hunter, for instance, there was a place where you can just barely see dinosaurs in the far distance, chewing grass...

The Aptonoth in the "Forest and Hills" area?
YN: That's it. It was just pre-rendered animation, but people would tell me they thought 3D models were being used. It may seem like an inconsequential touch, but I really wanted it to be there. It's okay if nobody consciously notices (laughs).

I did! I totally stopped to look at it (laughs).
YN: That's what I was hoping for! If people notice it, I know they're really enjoying that space. I know they'll observe it closely. It'll remain in their memory, and they might bring it up with friends: "Did you know about X in so-and-so game?" If it's a detail everyone notices, that conversation never even happens. Muramasa has a huge amount of little touches like that, so I hope people look for them.

In our previous interview for Odin Sphere, you said it was hard to tell if you were making a game or an animated movie at one point. Was Muramasa a similar experience?
GK: Actually, it was the opposite. The reason is simple—on Odin Sphere, Jin Sakimoto of Basiscape handled the music, but he told us it would take quite some time to record music for the drama sections, so he wanted them first. We stopped working on the gameplay entirely, focusing only on story sequences. It was just huge... what was originally supposed to be one and a half hours ended up being more than five. Apparently the music went way over budget (laughs). After having done five hours of story scenes, there was almost no time to spend on the game. Looking back, it seems like Odin Sphere was mostly story. It was originally supposed to have as many special moves as Muramasa, you know. There was just no time, and they were all cut... we had to do the Psypher Skills in *one week*. Because the actual gameplay of our previous title was so truncated, we knew we needed to spend time on it in Muramasa. That's why we researched control methods, and whether or not to use the remote, from so early on—about a year. It took that long to find our control scheme.

By the way, Mr. Kamitani, did you personally handle any animation in Muramasa? I remember the only thing you were able to animate yourself in Odin Sphere was Gwendolyn's run cycle.
GK: No! They told me... "Kamitani, you don't have to animate nothin'!", I wanted to cry (laughs). They wouldn't let me touch anything!

YN: I guess that's true (laughs).

GK: Well, it's because I swore to do the character design, story, and game design properly this time. I did a few of the backgrounds in Odin Sphere, too, but this time I gave everything up (laughs). I think I may have designed a rough version of Kyou in Muramasa... that's all.

IT WAS ENDLESS TRIAL AND ERROR. IF IT DIDN'T WORK, WE JUST SCRAPPED WHAT WE WERE DOING AND STARTED AGAIN.

YN: Wait a minute... no, not just Kyou. You also did the bamboo forest... and the sea.

GK: I thought you did the bamboo forest?

YN: It was me at first, but then you wanted to change it.

GK: That's because I asked you to make it look more like Gempei Toumaden, and you gave it back to me (laughs).

YN: I remember, you insisted it had to have a red *torii (ed. note—a traditional gate at a Shinto shrine)*, because it was supposed to look like Gempei Toumaden! So I said, "Why don't you put tigers in, too?!" (laughs)

GK: I think tigers might have been a little too much! There aren't any tigers in Japan (laughs). Anyway, that was about it for me this time. My other background contribution was half-jokingly suggesting our artists animate Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa (ed. note—one of the most famous ukiyo-e prints in history)*. I was asked, "But what would Kisuke and Momohime be doing on the sea?", and I said, "I don't know. Just think of something!" (laughs)

When I first saw the animated *Kanagawa* wave at TGS, I wondered how it'd be incorporated into the final game. I was a little surprised when it turned out to be a bonus stage.
YN: Ah, back then, we were thinking it would be some kind of travel system...

GK: Yeah, that's right... we were considering various warp ideas. One was a boat, and the other was the kago palanquin, which stayed. The Hokusai background was supposed to be for moving around.

How did it get turned into a mini-game?
YN: I suggested we make it playable. I figured it could be a collection mini-game with a high score, so fish seemed right.

GK: I laughed the first time I saw it. I wasn't expecting a game there!

YN: Something I don't like about mini-games is they often have completely different control schemes from the main game, and you can't use any of the skills you've developed. I think that's wrong, so we designed it with the same controls.

I want to inquire about something we don't hear enough about: The techniques Vanillaware uses to animate its games. Percentage-wise, how much is Flash-style cutout animation? How much is drawn frame-by-frame?
YN: Technically speaking, it's all Flash-style animation. That doesn't mean absolutely everything moves, but everything is running through our proprietary animation threading. In that sense, it's 100%. Everything has the potential to be animated with Flash techniques.

GK: But hand-drawn versus Flash animated... I guess it depends on the animator?

YN: That's true. There are people on staff who draw a massive amount of individual frames...

GK: There are people who are good at reducing them, and others who aren't...

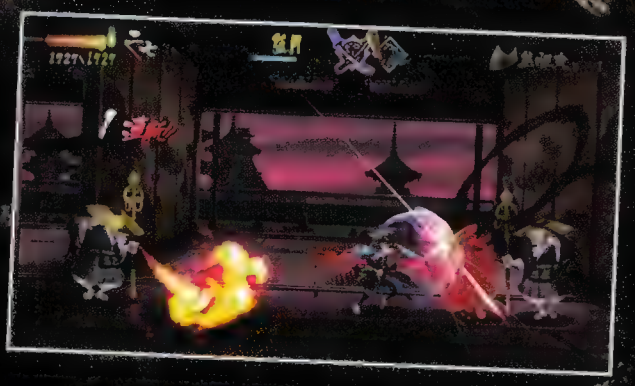
YN: It's a difficult question to answer (laughs).

GK: Some people will turn in incredible animation, and you're like "I can't believe there are so few actual frames!".

YN: If you want something to move like this *(Nishimura waves his hand laterally)*, you don't have to draw many individual frames, but if this happens *(Nishimura shakes his head "no")*, you really have no choice but to draw new images. If you examine the game closely, basically anything that wouldn't be possible with rotation or deformation of the bitmap is drawn individually. If only things like the Aobouzu's legs were possible with Flash... (laughs)

What about having to prepare both 4:3 and 16:9 modes for a 2D game? It's simple enough in 3D, but for 2D...
GK: Oh, that was so hard! I mean, across the board... it wasn't just one thing.

YN: At first we thought we'd just do a really sloppy job of it, like having a pillarbox frame with a "Muramasa" logo on the sides if you were playing in 16:9 (laughs). But once you see your game running properly in 16:9, you know it's the right way to go. It's all pluses: You can see more of the sides in a side-scrolling action game, making it easier to play, it's prettier, and you can see more of the background. 16:9 was overwhelmingly superior, so we decided to make the base game widescreen. What's tricky about going widescreen is that you have to display a lot more surface area than 4:3, and with a scrolling 2D game, there's a lot of data the player is never supposed to see. Adjusting the visuals to work in both modes was endless trial and error. We'd go into 4:3 mode to find our seams were well-hidden, only to have them pop back up again when the game zoomed in. It was especially bad if polygons started going off screen. Entire *backgrounds* would disappear when the shapes they were mapped to went too far off screen, because of polygon vertex identification. We had to cut up the polygons and replace them with multiples, but we screwed up the process for calculating that, so something that looked right at 4:3 would warp in 16:9... it was especially hard to fix late in development.



YOU KNOW THE SCENES WITH ALL THE BUDDHA STATUES? IF YOU LOOK REALLY CLOSELY, THEY'RE BREATHING.

So you would prefer people play in 16:9.
GK: Absolutely.

YN: Widescreen. Definitely. It's much more fun to play. Incidentally, when the screen locks for encounters the playable area ratio is almost exactly 16:9.

What about the music? You mentioned Jin Sakimoto before, and I know his company worked on Muramasa as well.
GK: Yes, we always have Mr. Sakimoto compose our theme music.

YN: The in-game tracks are by other people, his staff at Basiscape.

Were there as many retakes as there were on Odin Sphere?
YN: Yes, but this time... It wasn't really us requesting retakes on Muramasa. Mr. Sakimoto would be like, "Ar-rrrgh! This is all wrong!" (laughs)

GK: We didn't really butt in too much on the music this time. But that very first track...

YN: It was something (laughs).

GK: The first one was incredible. It actually had us a little worried.

YN: It had an uptempo bass rhythm, but the instruments Sakimoto used were *shakuhachi* and *shamisen*, traditional instruments you're not used to hearing with that kind of music. We were debating, "Will this work? Is this right?" I'm accustomed to it now, but... there was a retake on that, wasn't there?

GK: Yes, we asked him to make it sound a bit more "game-like". At the very beginning it was like *gagaku (ed. note—traditional court music)*, or maybe stage play sound design. It was more about single sounds rather than music, so we had him make it feel more like a game. There are vestiges that remain, though.

YN: Like when you fist enter Kyou you'll hear the single sound of a *suzu* bell, or the drifting sound of a koto.

GK: I think Sakimoto was very particular about traditional Japanese sound design at the beginning, but as soon as he was going with the game feel and the gloves came off, he started putting in rock (laughs).

I think Muramasa is a rare example of an *extremely* high-quality 2D game in 2009. I think I already know the answer to this, but... could you ever see yourself doing a direct sequel?
GK: Nope! The only time we ever thought about a sequel from a storyline and worldview perspective is Grim Grimoire, a game in which we selfishly concealed big secrets from the players. We thought we would tease things in the first game and reveal them in Grim Grimoire 2, but the first one didn't sell too well, so... there *was* no 2 (laughs). That was a big regret for me... I learned you have to give the player everything in one game (laughs). Now I want to be able to finish things so completely there's no need for a sequel. I would like to revisit the Japonesque aesthetic at some point, but I'm out of ideas for now—I'll have to let them percolate for a while.

Would you like to focus Vanillaware on action RPGs from now on? Do you ever want to revisit RTS? Grim Grimoire has a lot of fans here at play.
GK: I think I'll be making mostly action RPGs, yes. I'd like to try a pure action game as well. And I'd love to do another RTS, but they just don't sell well in Japan...

YN: An RTS with multiplayer might do better. Grim Grimoire didn't have multiplayer, but things might have been different if it had.

A more philosophical question: What was your greatest regret on Odin Sphere, and were you able to implement what you learned from it in Muramasa?
YN: The biggest thing... Odin Sphere was really cobbled together from a whole bunch of disparate parts, wasn't it? In terms of how it was programmed, everything.

GK: It was.

YN: The way everything rushed together at the end, the slowdown we weren't expecting, the long load times... we wanted to work off our failures, so we did early simulations on Muramasa with all its parts running simultaneously. Right down to the effects.

GK: It's not something that would have been impossible to do on Odin Sphere, it's just that we didn't have the experience yet.

YN: I also think we were able to remedy most of the difficult-to-understand aspects of Odin Sphere's system. Things like the Magic Mix system looked good on paper, but didn't really match with the direction of the game—it made more sense just to use physical sword attacks. That's why we established the Muramasa system early on, mandating that the three-sword structure and other basics would never change. I think that made this game a lot easier to understand, even at first glance.

GK: In other words, we were able to make this game relatively stress-free and a lot more fun to play.

YN: That's a good general statement to make, yeah. I think the most stress-inducing aspect of Odin Sphere was the slowdown, so we really paid attention to that. The real reasons behind the slowdown were manifold—most of us hadn't made this type of game before, so

we wasted huge amounts of polygons and data on the characters. The whole system was very storage-inefficient. Our staff has also learned to be aware of others more—they're able to sense better when they might be making someone else's work harder. Potential memory problems are addressed earlier, and everyone is better at grasping the situation now. In that sense, it was stress-free development as well. We were able to streamline both the actual data going into the game hardware, and also day-to-day planning.

GK: Really, the most crucial element was the experience the staff got working on Odin Sphere. We made mistakes on Muramasa, too, but we were able to follow up on them a lot faster.

YN: True.

GK: The only real bottleneck was my part. I apologize that it took a year to write the story (laughs).

You had trouble with the Odin Sphere story, too, didn't you? You said it would never end (laughs).

GK: Muramasa was almost the other way around. I *couldn't* write it... I just didn't know how to express things properly. First I had to familiarize myself with kabuki, and it was just endless study. It was a long time before I could even write the first line (laughs).

YN: I remember (laughs). Something as simple as the head priest of a temple... did we have the right term for him? The right form of address? Would it be the correct term for that particular *sect* of Buddhism? Did we have the social strata right? We just didn't know. So we had to study Buddhism (laughs).

GK: Exactly... what is the core precept of Buddhism? That was a big one. Was it okay for a proper Buddhist to die in the name of love, for instance? (laughs) If that happened to go against something the Gautama Buddha said, it would be a major discrepancy, and people would complain.

As a Japanese person, I have to wonder if this all might be too much to ask the average Western player to deal with. Are you worried about American audiences not connecting with Muramasa?

GK: Like I mentioned before, I wasn't considering Western audiences at all. I just wanted to present something authoritatively Japanese, like the ultimate Legend of Kage. I was totally incognizant of how it would be perceived overseas.

YN: "Incognizant" is probably going to sound pretty rude! (laughs)

GK: Oh, you're right. No, I was *highly* cognizant of the West!

(All laugh)

YN: Getting back to the point, though... we used other Japanese games as our model, but what we were looking at didn't *make* for very good models. This may sound rude, but they were very "fake Japan."

GK: Adding straightforward fantasy to a Japonesque story like Muramasa would have turned it into, well, *tokusatsu (ed. note—cheaply made Japanese "special effects" TV shows and movies)*. When thinking about how to incorporate fantastical elements, but still retain an authentic sense of ancient Japan, I realized the only answer was deep, deep study of the literary classics. I started with the obvious stuff, but it got more and more esoteric (laughs). I was actually wondering, maybe this is too obscure? In the end I did decide to take this game to those extremes. With that said, I think Muramasa might be like Harry Potter for a Japanese person—it's full of foreign culture, but not too difficult to understand.

What games did you look at other than Legend of Kage and Gempei Toumaden?

GK: Oh, Youkai Douchuuki (laughs). *(ed. note—another Namco side-scroller, known as Shadow Land in the West.)*

YN: Really? (laughs)

Oh, I totally see why (laughs).

GT: You know, it had a Nuppebou in it... I just love those old Namco games.

What about Last Ninja?

GK: Oh yeah, totally! I wanted to have a character like the monk in Last Ninja. And vertical scrolling stages (laughs).

YN: I don't remember you being that specific about titles to study. I do remember "Make it look like Gempei Toumaden," though (laughs).

GK: I guess manga was a bigger influence. I'd ask for things to look like *Sasuke* or *Watari (ed note—classic 1960s manga by Shirato Sanpei)*.

Speaking of those intrinsic Japanese elements, why Muramasa? Did you study the historical swordsmith and the blades he forged?

GK: Well, I knew that if we were doing a ninja action game, I wanted a hook like the Psyphers in Odin Sphere. Katanas were the obvious choice for something cool and uniquely Japanese, and what katanas might be magical? *Youtou (ed. note—literally, "fay/demon blades")*, of course, and what swordsmith's weapons are known in the popular imagination as *youtou*? Muramasa's! (laughs)

That reminds me, wasn't the original Japanese title "Oboro Muramasa Youtouden" ("Legend of Oboro Muramasa, the Demon Blade")? Why did it eventually become simply "Oboro Muramasa"? Was arriving at the right title difficult?

GK: No, not at all. I always determine the final title up front. If you start to question the title, you'll start to question the entire game. Teams that say "I don't know, we'll just call it 'Something Fantasy'!" usually have a lot of trouble (laughs).

YN: It was "Oboro Muramasa" from day one. Unfortunately, it turned out other companies held trademarks on the words "Oboro" and "Muramasa," so we were told the title was too similar. We had to come up with something, so that's where the "Youtouden" came from. Of course, at the same time, we were very insistent with Marvelous that it just be Oboro Muramasa (laughs). Finally things calmed down, and their legal team came to the conclusion that if we registered the logo along with the name, it would be all right.

GK: When we were told "Oboro Muramasa" might be a problem, what else were we thinking of... "Oboro Muramasa Youtou Senbonzuka," was it?

YN: It was even longer*. It was ridiculously long (laughs).

GK: It was like, "Well, all right then! You wanna give us copyright problems, we'll make the title impossibly long! Look at all these kanji!" (laughs) I actually thought we might stand out from other games with an absurdly long kanji title (laughs).

I'm afraid I have to ask your opinion on this, even though nobody could have predicted it when Muramasa development started: The Wii market has been very cold towards hardcore games on both sides of the Pacific. Do you have any thoughts?
GK: Well... this is something I've thought for a while, but market shrinkage was being talked about even in the latter days of PS2. I think it's just a contiguous issue, right on into the next generation. I also feel that the issue became more prominent with the splintering of hardware focus. I don't think there even *are* "core fans" in that big casual pie. It began with Sony advertising to the mass market, making their games look approachable—it resulted in a kind of market bubble with PSone and 2. But even then, "core" games only sold a few tens of thousands of copies. In Japan, at least, I think that may constitute the entire core pie. Will it get any bigger? Someone in my position can't possibly know. If new hardware comes out, excitement may be stirred up, but do I think this silly Wii-360-PS3 console war will eventually wear itself down.

I hope it does. Tell me, Mr. Kamitani, about your fascination with 2D. Where do you see 2D going? What does 2D still do better than 3D?
GK: In a 2D game there's only horizontal and vertical—you can't have a character walk around in 3D space. For me, that's the only difference between 2D and 3D. It's not as if photographic imagery trumps paintings... these things coexist. Paintings have value as paintings, and movies have value as movies. For me, it's not a matter of one doing something "better" than the other.

How is the localization going? I imagine it would be a difficult one. You may not be involved directly, but...
GK: Oh, we are. We're doing it now.

YN: It's difficult for us this minute, in realtime (laughs). We wanted the HUD to be Japanese-style, right? Everything is displayed in kanji, like Gempei Toumaden. Candles and kansuuji (ed. note—Chinese characters representing numbers), which I think looks very Japanese. Well, they're Chinese, but anyway (laughs). I think those brushstroke characters really give it "oriental" flavor... they just had to be there. All of these things displayed in the HUD are actually textures, not graphical fonts prepared by a programmer. Each word is individually rendered and stored as graphic data, so there's just a huge amount of them. We're making the five-language version for Europe now, and it's... I want to cry right now. I really want to weep! It's not just the sheer number, but also because I don't know these languages. If I'm told, "We altered this bit of German text, so please change it," I'll look at the textures and have to say, "Um... which one was it, now?" (laughs). I have to locate this stuff in a sea of textures, so all I can do is beg that it be properly checked later. In any case, it's not merely the language barrier, it's the volume of data.

Before we run out of time, I'd like to ask a few non-Muramasa questions, if I may. Marvelous, the

*Apparently, the full title considered was "Youtou Muramasa Ninpouchou Hyakki Youtou Senbonzuka" (Muramasa Demon Sword Ninja Arts Chronicle: Hundred Ogres, Thousand Blades).

Japanese publisher for Muramasa, recently stated that they were looking at porting some of their Wii catalogue to PS3/360. Is Muramasa going to be one of them?
GK: I don't think we have the kind of manpower to do a port right now (laughs). In any case, we really made this game for the Nunchuk, so converting it for other platforms would probably be difficult.

YN: We never, ever considered that Muramasa might go multi-platform, so I think it would be really difficult to do (laughs).

GK: It's theoretically possible Marvelous may have asked another company to port it, but we certainly haven't heard anything about it. I don't know if we'd really want to, either—if we had the time to do a port, I'd rather use it to make something new.

Can you give us any hints about the near future of Vanillaware?
GK: A hint, eh? (laughs) What should I say... well, we are going to expand into two production lines.

YN: That's not much of a hint (laughs). But yes, we are trying to get a bit bigger.

GK: We're going to bring on more people. I think we want about 25 employees... it's 21 right now.

So you'll be making two games simultaneously?
GK: We will. Basically, I want to groom a second director here besides myself. I don't want to be responsible for everything (laughs). Not that I even could be.

Will you continue to make 2D games?
GK: I think so. Well, we do want to work in 3D as well. We already made one 3D game—Fantasy Earth for Square Enix. Not that I have any intention of going up against super realistic Western games, but (laughs)... 3D means being able to do spatial gameplay. No matter what, 2D will always be flat. If you want a game about exploring space, or 360-degree fighting, it can't be 2D. I have a few ideas for games along those lines. The visuals would be pretty unique... I'd like to aim for an evolution of the Fantasy Earth style. You might call the art style "triumphing over low polygon counts" (laughs).

YN: I don't know if low polygon is the term. The forms are just simple.

GK: I love low polygon games.

Have you played any games recently that inspired you?
GK: I played Baldur's Gate yesterday! On PS2! (laughs)

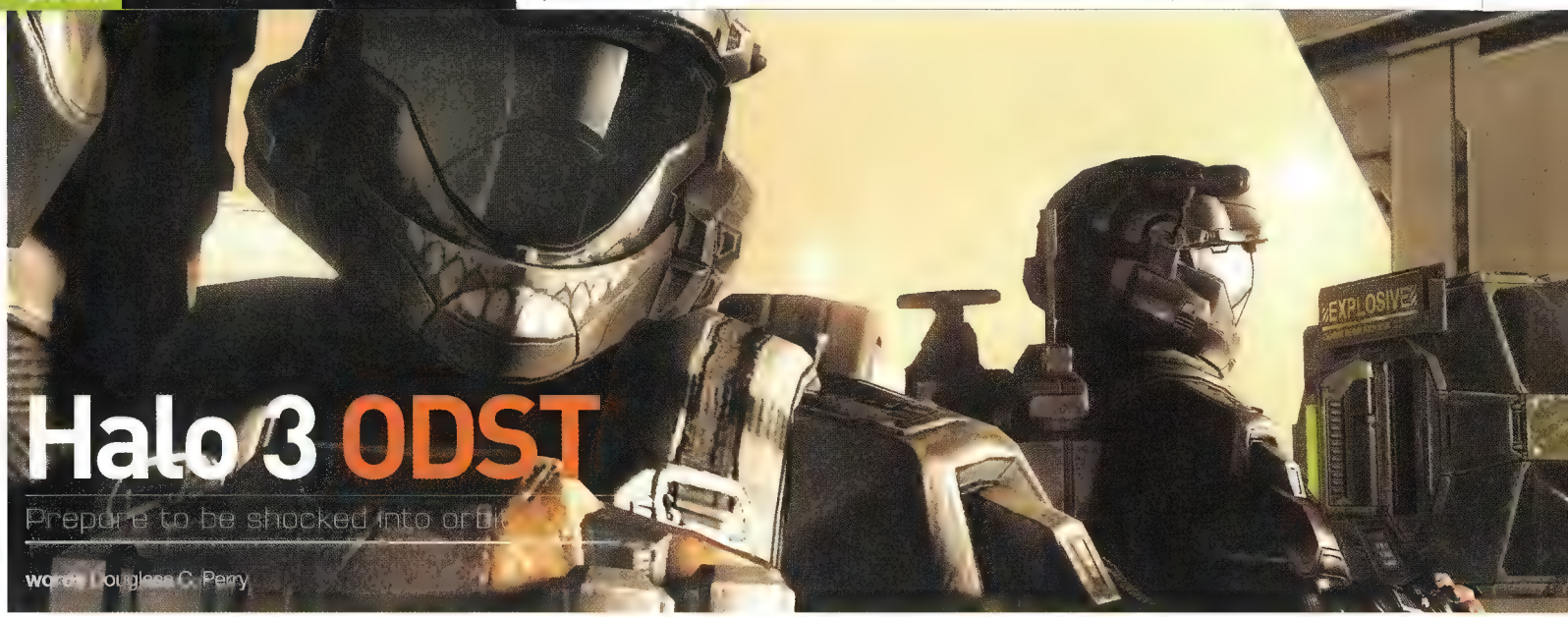
YN: Yesterday? (laughs)

So retro!
GK: It's awesome because it's retro. I thought I might play a game for a change, and it was just sitting in the shop.

We're out of time, so if you have a final message for your American fans...
GK: I'll be so grateful if you take the time to wrap your head around Muramasa: The Demon Blade. We think we really packed the excitement of a jidaigeki (ed. note—Japanese period piece) into the game, and the katanas are really cool, too! I sincerely hope you enjoy it.

Thank you so much for your time today.

System: Xbox360 **Developer:** Bungie Studios **Publisher:** Microsoft Game Studios **Available:** September 22



Halo 3 ODST

Prepare to be shocked into orbit

words Douglass C. Perry

"Rookie."

Not Master Chief. Not Arbiter. And not "killmasterzz343."

In Halo 3: ODST, Bungie takes its first steps away from the story arc completed by Halo 3, bestowing upon you a name so low on the totem pole, so anonymous, that it's not even a name. The game opens up in space. You're a human marine, recently transferred from the 26th MEF, and now stationed in a UNSC starship orbiting high above Earth. Along with you are five Orbital Drop Shock Troopers (ODST) talking shop. A digital transmission comes in: It's time to drop.

You strap into a pod, a wildly advanced Willy Wonka-like glass elevator (but much cooler), and are released into space. All of a sudden the massive scope of the war effort becomes clear. Looking past the dual joysticks, flashing dashboards, and reinforced windows of your drop unit, hundreds of ODSTs fall into space from the bellies of dozens of ships in a futuristic re-imagining of World War II American paratroopers dropping into Europe.

The ensuing scene is magnificent. You fall through space, transitioning into Earth's atmosphere made compete with blazing, heated externals and thunderous rumbling, but something goes wrong. A Covenant spaceship almost directly below enters into slipstream and creates a destructive blast in its wake, killing dozens of ODSTs and scattering your teammates out of sight. Six hours later, you awake alone in the darkness.

Welcome to New Mombasa, rookie.

The Whole Enchilada

This September's Halo 3: ODST, originally called Halo Recon and designed as an add-on pack, has grown extensively since it was envisioned and now lies somewhere between a full Halo retail game and the biggest add-on pack you've ever seen. It arrives in one retail package on two discs. The first disc comprises the story campaign, which can be played with one to four players cooperatively over an estimated six hours. There's Firefight, a survival-style, four-player co-op mode that's new to the series. When you're finished playing into the early morning hours in Firefight, you can re-trace your steps in Theater mode, which gives you the screen

A futuristic re-imagining of WW II American paratroopers dropping into Europe.

capture and movie replay capabilities found in Halo 3. Finally, there is Extras, the gateway for gamers to enter into the Halo Reach Beta (see sidebar).

The second disc features Bungie's vaunted multiplayer mode, which at this point is huge. It comprises three new maps, Heretic, Longshore, and Citadel Drop, all of the Halo 3 map packs, Heroic, Legendary, Cold Storage, and Mythic, and all of the original Halo 3 maps, for a total of 24 maps. That's in addition to the content creation and customization features found in Forge and Sandbox, and the extended achievements.

The ODST Campaign

It's night. You crawl out of the wrecked drop unit and find yourself in Mombasa's Occupied City Center; comprised of dimly lit tunnels, dozens of computer screens, and an ominously red murky sky. Your squad is not in sight. But you're not alone either: a pack of Grunts and Brutes patrol past your location. As an ODST, the standard SPARTAN tools and weapon sets aren't available. That means no regenerative shield. No duel wielding. No super jumping or heroic feats of strength. "ODSTs have special gear that SPARTANs don't," says Bungie lead design Joseph Staten. "This includes two new sound-suppressed weapons and the visor, a low light vision mode. One of those weapons is the Halo 1 pistol." Here's where old-time Halo 1 fans can breathe a sigh of relief: "F*&^ing finally!" The powerful scoped, suppressed pistol is joined by a suppressed SMG, and grenades. The other big difference in ODST is the lack of ammo; because you're outnumbered and out-gunned, your final weapon is stealth, a surprising and previously foreign concept in the Halo series.

Now that the Convent patrol has passed, you can look around. The City Center is decimated. Because it's night, the space around you looks large, difficult to gauge. Your eyes don't deceive. The City Center you've just observed is part of the single biggest environment Bungie has ever made. According to Staten, the original plan for this landscape was to drop the ODSTs in and let players explore it wholesale, but because of its size, as displayed by an enormous city street map, Bungie re-thought that plan. In the beginning of the campaign, you'll have limited access to the environment; as you progress, it opens up into a full wide-open area unlike any Bungie has created for the series.

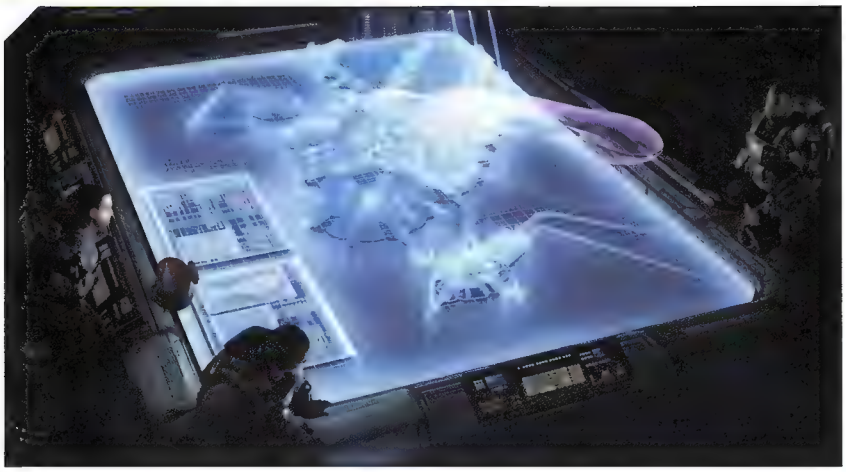
The team created the Firefight mode while designing Halo 3; it just didn't make the final cut.

The new visor enables you to see objects otherwise unidentifiable in the dark, like enemies; they appear outlined in red digitized lines. Using the visor, you also can locate objects left by team members. The first one, Dutch's remote detonator, touches off a flashback. "Great stories are told in original ways," explains Staten. "The detonator I found is a clue to the fate of another ODST, a guy named Dutch, who you'll flash back in time to play as. You'll flash back in time to play as other ODSTs too, piecing together clues until you solve the mysteries of New Mombasa."

Each of the six team members represents a flashback and a chapter in the story; and each soldier has a specialty. Meaning that in each flashback, you'll wield different weapons, not just the Rookie's pistol and SMG. Dutch is a heavy weapons specialist, and in his mission you must place charges along a bridge to prevent the oncoming Covenant brigade from overtaking another part of the city. Romeo wields a sniper rifle. Buck (who fans of the Halo books will know from The Fall of Reach) is a gunnery sergeant who looks to bear an assault rifle. It's unclear what the mysterious female Dare wields, and Mickey likes to carry a rocket launcher.

Let the Firefight Begin!

Firefight is a new mode for the Halo series, but it's not entirely "new." According to Bungie staffers, the team created the mode while designing Halo 3; it just didn't make the final cut.



Like Call of Duty 4's Zombie mode or Gears of War 2's Horde mode, Firefight is a survival game mode enabling up to four gamers to play on Xbox Live or System Link. The premise is simple. The game sends wave after wave of increasingly difficult Covenant enemies (Grunts, Brutes, and Chieftains to name a few) at you, offering a few moments in between assaults for gamers to gather ammo and guns. Bungie has publicly said vehicles will be available in Firefight including Warthogs. It's also likely other vehicles will be on hand, such as banshees and cycles.

The Firefight gameplay we witnessed captures that live, spontaneous multiplayer feel that Bungie specializes in, and the fresh game sequences are testimony to its fans' assuredly warm embrace. Gamers can boast their high scores and bask in attaining new achievements, or compare statistics on Bungie.net's Firefight online leaderboards.

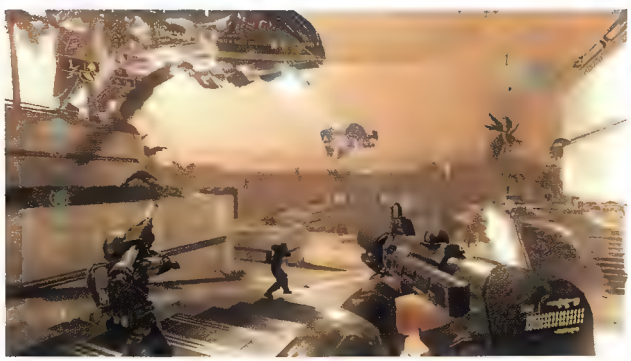
Firefight gameplay captures that live, spontaneous multiplayer feel.

Halo Reach

If you've followed Microsoft's annual approach to shooters, you know 2008 was Epic's turn with Gears of War 2 and 2009 is Bungie's turn with ODST. In 2010, however, Bungie is double dipping, as a second dev team is working on Halo Reach. Microsoft showed only a brief E3 video of Reach, but Halo fans know it as a valuable Forerunner planet upon which the Halo book, "The Fall of Reach" is based. More importantly, if you buy ODST, you'll get an invitation to play in Halo: Reach's Xbox LIVE multiplayer beta. And if you remember the Halo 3 beta, you'll want in.

Halo Legends

With the Halo graphic novel as a kind of forerunner (see how I did that?), Microsoft plans to release Halo Legends, a collection of original short anime films covering a variety of themes, times, and characters in the Halo universe, and featuring creative direction from anime pioneer Shinji Aramaki (*Appleseed* and *Appleseed EX Machina*), Mamoru Oshii (director of the *Ghost in the Shell* movies), and additional production from Joseph Chou of J-Spec Pictures. The anime production companies involved include Bones Inc., Casio Entertainment Inc., Production I.G, STUDIO4°C, and Toei Animation. Halo Legends will be distributed globally by Warner Home Video.



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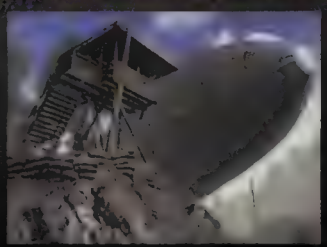
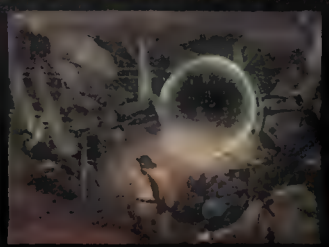
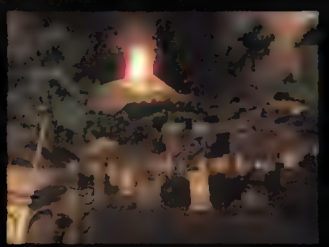

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System: Xbox 360 **Developer:** SOFTMAX **Publisher:** Namco Bandai Games **ESRB:** RP **Available:** October

Magna Carta 2

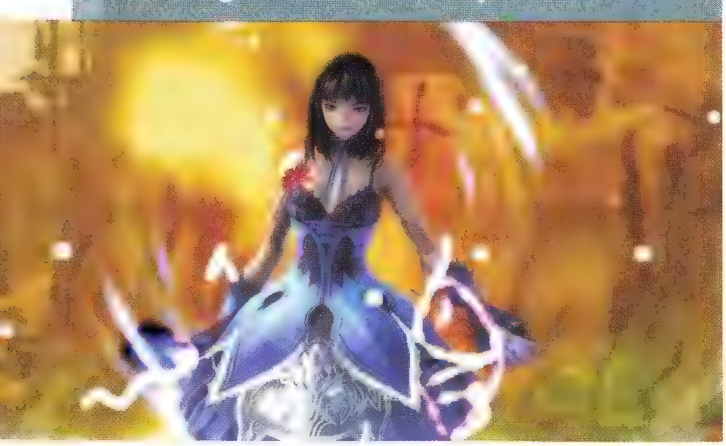
Korean soul

words Dave Halverson

I became intrigued with Magna Carta—not to be confused with the historic document on which democracy was forged—back in 2000 when I came across a piece of artwork from the series' character designer Hyung Tae Kim. Exceeding anything I'd seen from the likes of Square, Enix, Sega, or any of the other Japanese RPG masters, it was hard to imagine how such a beautifully designed RPG could be limited to the Korean PC market. Soon after, a PS2-bound sequel, Tears of Blood, was announced and thus began the countdown to what I regarded would be "my" ultimate RPG. As much as I had embraced the traditional turn-based RPG, one can only stand so much reiteration. Beginning with Phantasy Star, through the Lunar, Final Fantasy, Grandia, Wild Arms, and Suikoden series (to name but a few), the walk-fight turn-based modus-operandi had become little more than a laborious means of unlocking story and art that I just had to see, while the Korean model showed glimmers of shiny new life through a combination of exquisitely designed characters (that resonated in the actual on-screen models) and real-time elements revolving around unique new battle and party systems.

Playing a subtitled version of Tears of Blood (pre-localization) in preparation for our looming cover story (September '02), I was

Magna Carta lit my way down the path to Korean game design and development



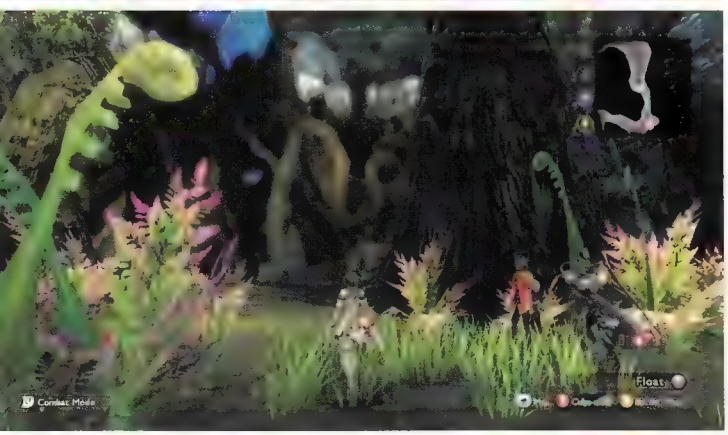
encouraged, to say the least. The characters were indeed gorgeous for the generation's tech and, although somewhat overly complex, the battle system was a refreshing break from the norm. All that was left was for Atlus to send it on its way with one of their sterling localizations… and then fate intervened. Due to the writers' strike, the game's voice over was farmed out to Canada from whence it returned, in a word, broken. Still, and more significantly, Magna Carta lit my way down the path to Korean game design and development, which I've come to love as I did the Japanese approach before they adopted a more Western philosophy. While precious few studios have stayed the course, such as Treasure, in Japan, Korean designers remain unrestrained in their depiction of fantasy. It isn't uncommon to pop open a treasure chest or break open barrels or pottery to reveal hidden SID (money), or even take in a mini-game to complete or trigger an event in Magna Carta 2. There's nary a care for seamless transitions either. SOFTMAX, and Korean game makers in general, emphasize empathy the old fashioned way—through art and dialogue—and are far more concerned with presentation then plausibility, and for this I applaud them. Following in the footsteps of the games that cemented my passion for the Korean aesthetic—Magna Carta: Tears of Blood, Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders, and Ninety-Nine Nights—Magna Carta 2 has strengthened that resolve to iron clad as I await not only the final version, but Kingdom Under Fire 2 and Ninety-Nine Nights 2 in the year ahead. Good times.

If there were any doubt, it's now crystal clear that Magna Carta is Korea's Final Fantasy. Not to compare the two in any way, shape, or form—as they are vastly different games in execution—there's no denying the pattern of RPGs from various eras sharing similar systems and style.

Set centuries after the events of Tears of Blood, Magna Carta 2 finds the kingdom of Lanzheim embroiled in a bitter, take-no-prisoners, civil war. Two years after the assassination of Queen Evelyn and the subsequent takeover of the throne by Prime Minister Schunzeit, her successor queen Rzephillda—only 15 at the time—joined forces with Count Alex to form the Northern Army made up of Feudal Lords from surrounding regions. Two years later, as the war rages on, we find our hero, Juto, holed up on a remote island with no memory of his past, far removed from the front lines but not completely separated from the war. The Northern Army has been harboring a weapon that could turn the tide in the North's favor, but the Southern Army is closing in on its location. The events that open Magna Carta 2 do well to define the characters and outline the game flow, but barely scratch the surface of the plight and splendid RPG playing ahead.

Early buzz focused on the battle system is well deserved. You can switch between Move Mode and Battle Mode at will, as well as toggle and select the party leader of your liking, or

Wanna join my party?



Magna Carta 2 is as unique and individual as RPGs get

whomever you feel is best suited to lead at any given time. Monsters appear wandering on the field and can be either engaged or ignored, depending on the situation, mission or quest. In Move Mode your leader can perform various field actions such as triggering events, using items, interacting with the environment, shopping, and equipping. Once a monster is spotted there's no need to avoid it or approach it to trigger battle. You can assume Battle stance from a distance with the flick of a button and once you're in range dash to into seamless battle, although once engaged the enemy can do the same. The fighting is 100 percent real-time and rides on an ingenious system that's a little tricky at first, but oh-so well worth mastering. Each time you strike the enemy, Stamina (depicted on a gauge) is used. Once the Stamina gauge reaches its limit after three or so quick normal attacks, the Overdrive gauge is triggered and begins to drain. Attacking in this stimulated Overdrive state using whatever special skill you have selected for that character causes them to enter Overheat status. In Overheat status—during which the character is fatigued and unable to move—changing leaders and attacking before the gauge empties (and it's a generous gauge) triggers a chain which can then be passed to the next Leader (before the subsequent character's Overheat gauge runs out) for a Chain Break, essentially polishing off a three-character evolving special attack. Lesser monsters serve as little more than practice within each field, and go down just as easily by simply hacking away and switching leads, but as your nemesis becomes stronger the system becomes much more than a means to a quicker kill. Certain lesser beasts' shells can only be cracked by one of Argo Kindu's axe skills for instance, so it becomes necessary to achieve Overheat status and then pass the residual energy to Argo to deal the de-shelling blow. Later bosses, however, require deft knowledge of your parties magic and melee abilities in unison with their AI. You can select three characters from your growing party—all of which appear separately on the map, thank you very much, no blending into one here—and set each one's AI according to your situation/mission including how they concentrate their attacks, heal and use magic.

Magna Carta 2 is also unique in the way it unfolds at the users' discretion. Aside from the requisite missions to further the story, the more you converse within the amazing city centers the more side quests you're presented, each of which offers a worthwhile bounty to make the journey ahead that much easier. Proper weapon, skill, and armor management is key to gaining the upper hand in Magna Carta 2 and you'll need all the SID and Kamond (to boost your parties attributes) you can get your hands on to do it. Kamond are jewels filled with condensed "Kan," of which there are several varieties. It's a far too menu-driven of a system to address here other than to say it's a great way to reward the more nomadic and adventurous RPG player.

Rushing through Magna Carta 2 is not recommended. Not only is the story quite wonderful—I'm at the end of disc one and firmly embroiled in my party's individual struggles—but the characters are superb in persona and design; the environments magical, thoroughly engaging and never tiresome; the music and CGI blissful; and the localization outstanding. Most of all however, Magna Carta 2 is as unique and individual as RPGs get, and these days, that means everything. play

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Pro Gamer • Empire Arcadia

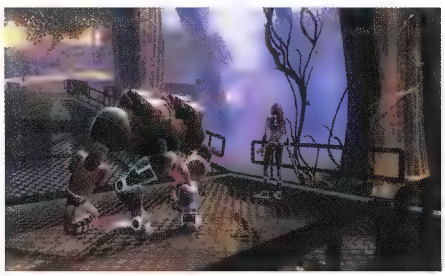
System: Wii **Developer:** Bionic Games **Publisher:** Capcom **Available:** September 29

Spyborgs

Because all crates must die!

words Dave Halverson

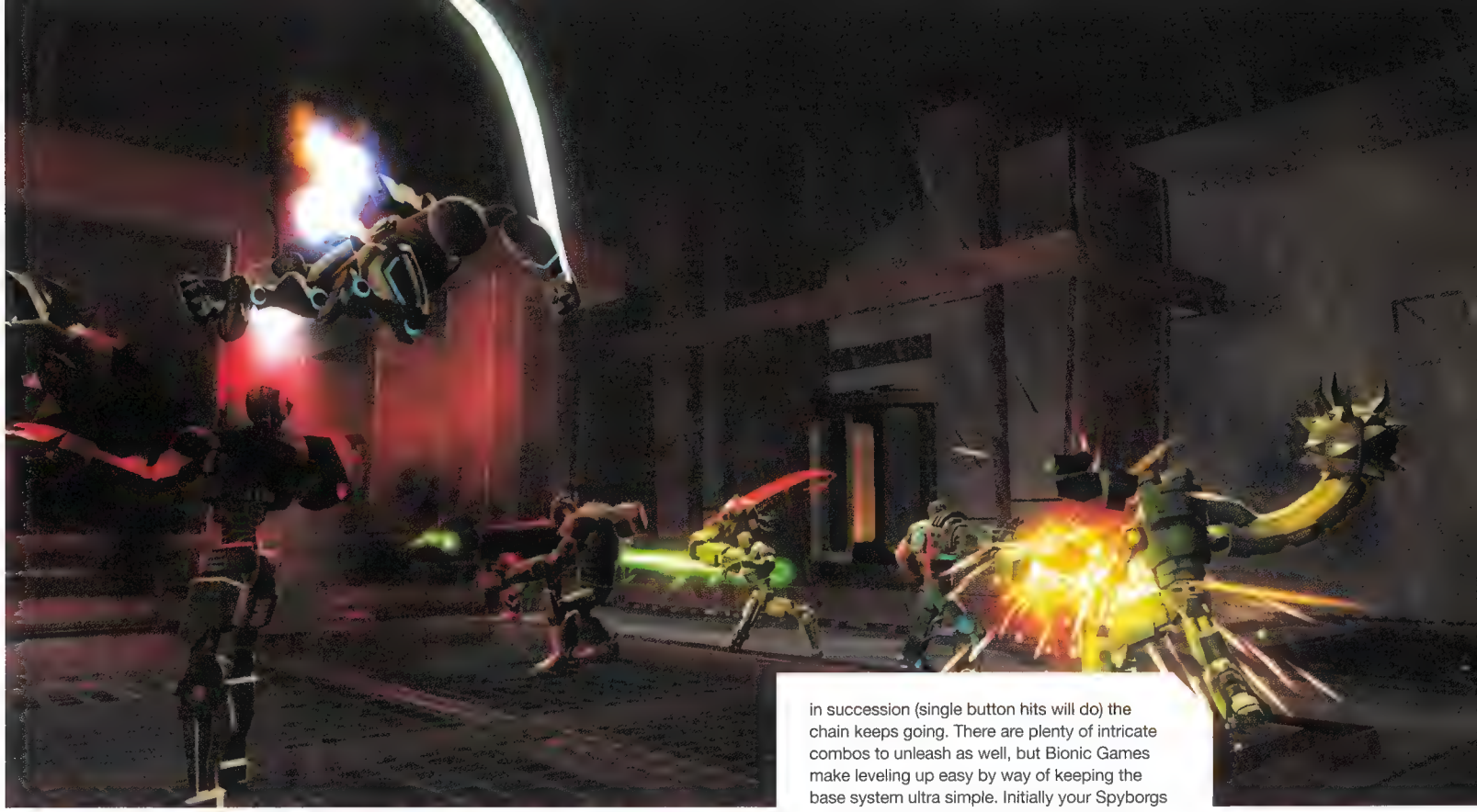
There's a lot to be said for embarking on an epic adventure, but there's also a lot to be said for beating the snot out of anything that moves and not sweating the details. That's where Spyborgs comes in. Sure there's a "story," but like any good arcade-style smash-'em-up, it doesn't veer too far from see bad guys; kill bad guys, or in this case fellow 'borg, Jackal, the traitorous son of a toaster oven who's gone rogue and unleashed a horde of mechanized killing machines to cover his tracks. To be fair there is quite a bit of data (back-story) available on the Spyborgs, you just have to earn/look for it. From what I've managed to divulge from our 3- (of 5) area preview discs, the Spyborg project was initiated in 2129 to produce an elite team of cyber warriors using special implants that turned animals into humanoid soldiers. Initial human trials proved fatal; however, unless my eyes deceive me, circa 2134 they've pretty much worked out all the kinks.



Whether you go it alone with an AI partner, or co-op with a fleshy friend, the name of the game in Spyborgs is teamwork (so don't hog the crates!). When you're not hammering away at the game's uniquely designed mechanized hordes (and even a bit while you are), strategically smashing open crates is paramount to your survival. Blue crates contain Healing Cores, red crates contain Sparks to purchase upgrades, and gold Cores fill your Finisher gauge, allowing you to unleash (simple) dual-Spyborg motion controlled finishers that look super cool and yield maximum damage.

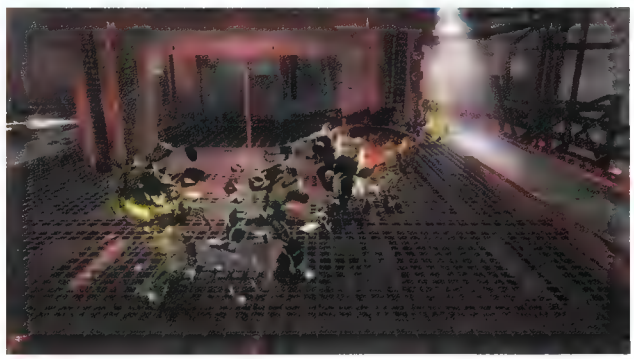
On any difficulty level above casual, maximizing the many crates strewn about the levels, along with uncloaking hidden ones via SpyVision, is vital to your survival. Unlike the vast majority of arcade-style brawlers the rival factions in Spyborgs put up a formidable fight. Many a machination has longer reach than any of our protagonists and they're prone to blocking and exploiting their numbers. The key to countering their advances, aside from the obvious (skills), is chaining combos that render points at level's end to upgrade and modify your three individually specialized combatants. Nothing too complex here; as long as you keep smacking the enemy

Nothing soothes the savage geek like a 200-foot tall killer robot.



in succession (single button hits will do) the chain keeps going. There are plenty of intricate combos to unleash as well, but Bionic Games make leveling up easy by way of keeping the base system ultra simple. Initially your Spyborgs are little more than hacking, slashing, blocking machines; the rest is up to you. How fast you attain the air attacks, dodges, and dashes you need to get the most out of Spyborgs depends on how well you play the game. It's an interesting way to balance a brawler, although it's also prone to the tedium that's rendered many a similar action game laborious.

That's where SpyVision and bosses like Eighty Six come in. Nothing soothes the savage geek like a 200-foot tall killer robot. I just hope there's more where he came from. Spyborgs is also smartly designed with the widest possible Wii audience in mind, combining a Saturday morning cartoon feel with cool robo-designs—the enemy is constantly throwing new mecha your way with unique attacks to keep you on your toes—and four difficulty settings; Novice, Casual, Core and Adrenaline. The Spyborgs themselves are nicely diversified too. Stinger is your archetypal buff action hero, Bouncer's the big-bad-buff but all together cool robot, and Clandestine a.k.a. Clan takes care of those of us who prefer a little female eye candy while we beat the scrap out of assorted marauding thingamajigs. Only time, and the final build, will tell if Spyborgs is the whole package or not but if Bionic Games' pedigree is any indication, it's safe to assume that it's all downhill from here. play



When it rains, it pours.

System: Xbox 360, PS3, PC **Developer:** Obsidian **Publisher:** Sega **Available:** October

Alpha Protocol

A bold space marine in RPG clothing

words Casey Loe

When Gears of War creator Cliff Bleszinski told develop-online.com that "the future of RPGs is shooters," his crystal ball may have been nothing more than next month's Gamestop release list. October brings not one, but two shooters that profess to be RPGs: Sega's Alpha Protocol and 2K's Borderlands. Fallout 3 has proven that a hybrid of the two genres is possible, but when your basic gameplay is pure action, how could anyone possibly consider these games to be RPGs? The makers of Alpha Protocol have a one-word answer: Choice. "Alpha Protocol is based around choice, and that is cemented and driven home throughout the game," explains producer Tim Ernst. "From the conversation system, from the way you equip yourself, how you approach a particular level... It's all about player choice." There are indeed a great many choices to make in Alpha Protocol, but despite what the marketing campaign would have you believe, opting out of 25 solid hours of twitch-shooter gameplay isn't one of them.

Players take the role of agent Michael Thorton, a new recruit for off-the-books American intelligence agency Alpha Protocol. He's a spy, but not the fun tuxes-and-martini type. His job is to bring justice to a terrorist cell that downed an airliner, and you'll have to visit the shittiest armpits of the world to it, and kill a whole lot of people while you're there. (Sadly, Monte Carlo, Aston Martins, and scantily clad women have tragically little to do with the sorts of problems that America is facing these days.) In many ways, Thorton is just a glorified mercenary; Alpha Protocol provides safehouses and supplies, but doesn't offer any money for operations, so you'll have to steal or extort it along the way. This makes for a convenient game mechanic, of course, but it also makes for some of the game's most interesting choices: Kill a weapons dealer to make the world a better place, or blackmail him for money and supplies so you'll be better equipped to do good elsewhere? Alpha Protocol doesn't care about right or wrong; all the decisions are cold, pragmatic calculations instead of the usual kick-puppy/help-old-lady duality that passes for free choice in so many other games.

The decisions you make will rear their heads at surprising times, and ultimately have a major impact on how the game's final mission plays out. But the story proceeds down the same roughly linear path, going from one location to the next and offering a series of objective-based missions for you to pursue in each area. The choices seem to be focused less around major plot forks and more around subtle decisions that affect your relationship with other characters and factions. "Probably the most pivotal system in any RPG is its dialogue system" says Ernst, and it's clear that it's been a major focus of the team's efforts. You

The decisions you make will rear their heads at surprising times.

can't choose specifics responses, but you can choose an attitude—suave, casual, professional, angry, and so on. You can consistently role-play as a slick James Bond or a gruff Jack Bauer if you like, or you can take your handler's advice and view conversation as a weapon, telling your partners what they want to hear in order to unlock experience points, new intel, and perks that provide minor bonuses on the battlefield. Of course, it wouldn't matter how fancy the conversation system was if it didn't have well-written dialogue and voice acting, and Alpha Protocol excels in both fields. Michael does a convincing job of selling whatever attitude you assign to him, and every member of the game's supporting cast seems well developed and completely believable.

The dialogue system is highly reminiscent of Mass Effect, and it's far from the only similarity that the two games share. Leveling up earns you skill points to spend in a variety of fields, allowing you to focus on favored weapons like assault rifles, or in specific tactics like stealth and hand-to-hand combat. Your skills unlock special abilities that you can use at will, like boosted sensitivity to enemy guard placements or a period of heightened focus that ups your critical-hit rate. And you can buy weapons, body armor, and gadgets, and modify them with scopes, silencers, and custom stocks to fit your chosen play style. In an inspired twist, you can also purchase intel at the shop, unlocking pre-labeled maps and new sub-objectives, or arranging for a private contractor to cause a distraction or leave a sniper rifle at a key point on the battlefield.

Those could definitely be considered RPG elements, but they don't change the fact that when you hit the battlefield, you're basically playing any given Tom Clancy action game. Alpha Protocol borrows the typical Gears of War control scheme and cover system, and offers the usual choice between attempting to sneak around the battlefield and charging in with guns blazing. The missions are pure action, and aren't even particularly deep when compared to other tactical-action games; there are cute mini-games for hacking into computers and picking locks, but there are no light and shadow mechanics, no squadmates to coordinate with, and no need to worry about hiding bodies. The enemy AI isn't particularly advanced (at least, not in our preview build); when one notices you they all attack in lockstep without any apparent communication between them, and no matter what they've seen or experienced, you can send them snapping back to their normal routines by disabling the alarm system.

After each lengthy battle through an enemy compound, there will be choices to make: do you destroy that shipment of enemy weapons, or have it rerouted to an illicit arms dealer who will give you a cut of the profits? Do you execute the bad guy, or let him go in hopes he'll come in handy later? These decisions do have interesting payoffs, but does having choices, a shop, and an experience-point system transform an action game into an RPG? I think not, and as a fan of both genres, it bothers me to hear Sega constantly pushing Alpha Protocol as something it's not. If Alpha Protocol is an RPG, then why is 95% of the gameplay straight out of Metal Gear Solid and Splinter Cell? Does a modicum of depth in an action game really instantly transform it into an RPG? (And don't give me that "well, you're playing a role" crap, because that's true of *every* game.) Alpha Protocol does break from the shooter archetype in offering a focus on player choices, well-written dialogue, and a compelling narrative. But why can't a third-person shooter have things like that? Do we really think so little of shooters that any game is automatically excluded from the genre if it involves a few menus and a bit of reading?

It's too early to tell if Alpha Protocol's more inspired elements can successfully mesh with the traditional shooter at its core, but I can tell you one thing with certainty—this is no RPG. Role-playing games are a notoriously difficult genre to define, but if the genre has one central pillar, it's a focus on strategy or exploration over reflex-driven action. A mission-based third-person shooter certainly doesn't qualify, even if it does have a well-written story, strong player customization options, and an interesting focus on choice. But if Obsidian and Sega can pull all that off while maintaining the oh-so-satisfying shooter fundamentals of blowing dudes' heads off, that'll be revolutionary enough for me. play

Taking out the trash...

System: PS3. X360 **Developer:** Ubisoft Montreal **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Available:** 4th Quarter 2009

Assassin's Creed 2

Killer sequel

words Matt Cabral

2007's Assassin's Creed stands as one of this generation's defining games. Still, it wasn't without its flaws; most notable was a repetitive mission structure that saw cloaked killer Altair picking more pockets than a petty purse-snatcher. At a recent demo of Ubisoft's eagerly anticipated sequel, executive producer Jade Raymond clearly expressed this would not be an issue in AC2; noting the "frustrations" users had with the previous game's "pattern-based" play, she assured me the sequel's multiple (up to 15) mission types would allow for an even more engaging, varied experience for those brave enough to bare the blades of new badass Ezio.

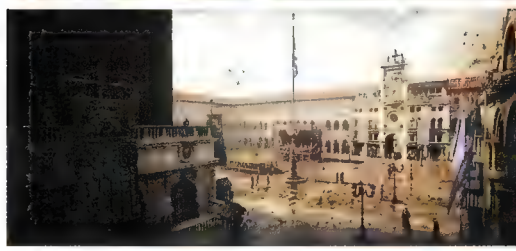
With that concern quickly addressed, I was free to enjoy many of the other tricks AC2 has tucked under its white robes. First up, the series' new setting—15th century Italy—complements a gorgeous visual direction. The demo opened in Venice, where a carnival-like celebration gave way to masked dancers, colorful decorations, and fireworks lighting the evening sky. Before I'd finished gobbling up the eye candy though, Ezio quietly rose from a bench, gutted a goon, and placed his corpse in the seat he'd just vacated. With this swift, cinematic kill, it was time to see what else this new hooded killer could do.

As Raymond explained that Altair's successor would be outfitted with a larger repertoire of life-siphoning abilities, I was actually witnessing many of them unfold before my eyes. A highlight included Ezio approaching two guards—almost looking as though he might offer them a simultaneous high-five—and driving hidden blades (one beneath each sleeve) into their necks. Another impressive hit began with Ezio hiding in a wagon of hay while a suspicious guard poked around; in a blink-and-you-miss-it moment, he popped from his hiding place, took out his nosy nemesis, then hid the body in the hay. In yet another slick kill that had me wishing I was the one behind the gamepad, Ezio dropped from a column and took out an unsuspecting sap with amazing

death-from-above finesse.

These creative kills had me counting the days till I get to don Ezio's robes, but another new aspect ratcheted my anticipation even further; among many other yet-to-be announced historical figures, Leonardo da Vinci will apparently play a significant role in Ezio's kill-happy quest. More specifically, the famed Renaissance man's inventions will factor greatly into the game, helping Ezio foil the opposition and reach his goals. Just in my short demo I watched him evade attackers and dodge flaming arrows while swooping over Venice in the great inventor's flying machine, and moments later, on foot, distract a group of guards with a da Vinci-created smoke bomb. Raymond wouldn't go into detail on what other da Vinci goodies we could expect Ezio to utilize, but promised there'd be many more.

Despite its sometimes repetitive nature, Assassin's Creed was still groundbreaking enough to earn it a spot among my favorite current-gen experiences. So seeing a sequel in action that addresses the original's flaws, while retaining what worked so well, has me eager to get behind the jugular-piercing steel all over again. But it's the new stuff—the Renaissance setting, stylish kills, da Vinci gadgets—that pack this sequel with so much more promise. There's still much to learn about AC2's story, gameplay, and mysterious new death-dealer, but based on my all-too-brief taste, it's clear Ezio is out for blood...and a Game of the Year nod. play



15th Century Italy is a remarkably gorgeous setting for such a grim trade.

Leonardo da Vinci will apparently play a significant role in Ezio's kill-happy quest.

Dead Space and Resident Evil Infect the Wii

Happy Hunting...

words Matt Cabral

I'm far from sold on Wii-waggling as an acceptable replacement for traditional gampad navigation. However, I won't deny the quirky controller's ability to practically fuse itself with my hand when I've got a rail-shooter spinning in the Wii's disc drive. Once I've completed a Wii title it rarely remains in the replay rotation, but Resident Evil: Umbrella Chronicles and House of the Dead: Overkill are the exception, making enough trips from game library to Wii to earn them frequent flier memberships. Between the pick-up-and-play appeal, tight controls and, let's be honest, my insatiable appetite for painting game worlds with zombie entrails, these titles keep me coming back. If like me your trigger finger involuntarily twitches in your sleep, craving fresh excuses to squeeze that B button, you're in luck as this winter brings two new reasons to lock and load your WiiMotes with Dead Space: Extraction and Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles.

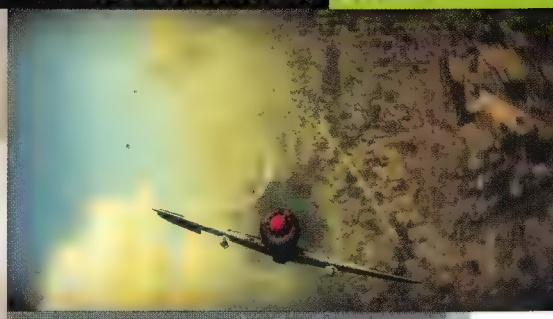
The first, a prequel to one of last year's biggest surprises, again places players on the doomed Ishimura spacecraft. While Dead Space explored the events following the Necromorph attack, Extraction puts you right in the thick of the grotesque beasties' limb-flailing invasion. This means more strategic dismemberment, complemented by plenty of in-your-face gore. Dead Space stand-bys such as telekinesis and stasis ensure you actually stand a chance against the infection-spreading hordes, while a mostly set, yet cinematic camera frames the action in ways that'll keep your shorts soiled and skin crawling. Recently going hands-on with Extraction, I was relieved to find the controls tight and the action amped. Cool touches, like secondary firing being controlled by holding the WiiRemote sideways, and having to shake it like a glow stick to keep areas lit, make great use out of the motion-sensing tech. Additionally, a twisty tale involving Lexine—a sexy crew member requiring your protection—ratchets the frights as high as the body count. Rounding out the no-one-can-hear-you-scream scares is same-screen co-op, allowing you to recruit a limb-blasting buddy for this pulse-spiking trek through space.

The erratic camera ensures the frights come fast and furious.

If it takes more traditional brain-hungering zombies to get your nape-of-neck hairs dancing a jig, then Resident Evil: Darkside Chronicles might offer a better reason to recharge those WiiMote batteries. Like a bubbling boil on the surface of rotting flesh, this one is oozing...with fan-service. Revisiting events from franchise faves Resident Evil 2 and Code Veronica (and plenty of still-unannounced content), DC heads back to Raccoon City—and that damn zombie-attracting police station—and brings back skilled slayers Leon S. Kennedy and Claire Redfield. In addition to the nostalgia factor, fans can expect impressive Havok-assisted kills and a more cinematic presentation than Umbrella Chronicles offered. Heading up this more immersive approach is shaky-cam tech, pacing the experience with plenty of scripted monster-in-closet moments; the intentionally erratic camera's movements ensure the frights come fast and furious, leaving precious little time to catch your breath or nibble on green herbs. Co-op is back, too, and solo play will now see your AI-driven ass-kicker on-screen—perfect for ogling Claire in between scoring head-shots. Those who thought RE5 abandoned the series' horror roots for run-and-gun gameplay should be pleasantly surprised by Darkside Chronicles' more bump-in-the-night production. With RE's brain-craving masses headed back to the Wii, and Dead Space's pesky Necromorphs making their debut on the console, I'm anxiously anticipating a busy season of lights-off/volume-up gaming. play

Resident Evil

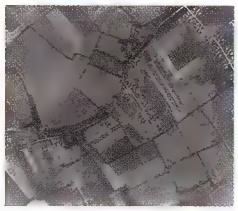
Dead Space

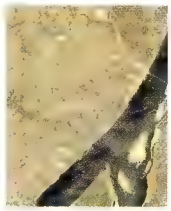


IL 2 Sturmovik

Harder to play than pronounce.

Gamers aren't pilots. But perhaps we can be after 80+ hours of Il-2 Sturmovik.





Where's a targeting reticule when you need one?

I've decided that any game that starts with actual black-and-white footage of World War II is awesome, especially if that footage is inter-cut with in-game graphics. The bald audacity of mixing scenes of very real, very dead soldiers with Xbox 360 rendered airplanes, packaging it as an arcade entertainment experience, and focus-testing the action on groups of young gamers—it's all so admirable, so cold. Cold like a Coca-Cola.

Underscore that title screen with swelling, patriotic strings and horns, and I'll probably be bouncing up and down in my chair while the loading reticule spins. I'm not joking when I write this next sentence: our grandchildren, or perhaps our children, will be playing the September 11th game from the comfort of their couches. Il-2 Sturmovik is the seed of a game box that reads: "Be a terrorist! Be an office employee! Be a firefighter!" That's what we're talking about, gang. If this offends, it's just because you lived through it. And since I'm incapable of unravelling what it all means, I've decided to embrace it.

Birds of Prey is the sequel to a well-received PC game released in 2001 (and the series of expansion packs that followed). The new title incorporates the grueling difficulty of a flight-sim, but opens up the title to a broader audience with a new Arcade mode. The differences are vast: firing a volley of shots in arcade mode is like After Burner with period planes. Doing the same in Simulator mode results in physics-induced torque pulling your plane out of line, before you fall into a spin you can't escape, ending in an inevitable crash along the French countryside. Gamers aren't pilots. But perhaps we can be after 80+ hours of Il-2 Sturmovik.

This game is a labor of love. It's not a cash-hungry tie-in, nor a license. It's a sequel to a game, sure, but one that most PlayStation players probably have never heard of. This is a title made by people who really want to make a World War II flight sim. Touches like the vintage, vignette camera, the authentic (recorded) engine sounds on each plane—it's all part of the "please-love-this-game" presentation. When damage tears through your plane, the engine reacts, pulling and coercing your craft along uncertain paths. The damage is visual, too; a dogfight ends in harrowing gashes along the body of your jet, through which you can see the sea beneath. "Crash," beckons the water. "Plummet into our waves, and sleep through the battle," whisper sirens through the tears in your wings. Thankfully, if you heed their call, you can re-spawn and start again.

An encyclopedia gives context to the fights, and detailed analyses on the planes are available for History Channel junkies. Though I didn't get to preview it, the mulitplayer online dog-fights threaten total addiction. Each of the six or so campaigns are based on actual accounts of the battles, written by pilots—and we're not just talking planes-vs-planes. Bombing runs, scouting missions, and offensive/defensive variations make up the whole package, though the variety is tempered by the fact that you're always flying and targeting something. There aren't enough combat-heavy WWII flight games out there, and it's nice that when one comes out, it's loaded to the gills. Or would that be propellers? play

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Talking Shop with Jimmy Palmiotti

play online gets a special interview with comic writer Jimmy Palmiotti, as we talk Power Girl, the Last Resort, and more. (search: "jimmy palmiotti")

Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: Play games in the genres I know and love to their conclusion and then rate them on how well, or not, they deliver relative to the system, genre, and target audience.
Brain Drain: Of my two most anticipated games of the year it's one down—Muramasa—and one to go, Brutal Legend. So far so great. As amazing as I knew Muramasa would be I never expected the gameplay to be so incredibly inventive and the story so deep and compelling. To have a side-scrolling game that looks this majestic—every time beautiful Momohime enters a Hot Spring and looks up as if she can feel my eyes on her, I melt, and the countryside and characters exemplify everything I love about video games—and plays this good I feel truly blessed at this stage in the game, and I never imagined I could love a soundtrack again like I did Symphony's, yet, I do. OK Doublefine, make my 2009... Special thanks to Shane B. this month too. As long as guys like Shane are around, rest assured, it shall be kept real.
Game of the Month: Of course, Muramasa: The Demon Blade. Guess I should let the rest of these guys and girl (hey Heather!) at it now. Nah...my Precious!!

Casey Lee
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end. **Brain Drain:** After last year's holiday cluster#*ck, a great many publishers decided to withhold their A-list games for a 1st Quarter 2010 release. That was a good thing. Problem is, half of the remaining games have also been delayed until 2010, so now we're facing the weakest holiday season ever. There's still time, Sega! Push up Bayonetta and save Christmas!
Game of the Month: DeathSmiles

Brady Fiechter
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).
Brain Drain: I'm having a lot of fun with the new Bionic Commando, but it's an interesting case study to look at how much more engaging Rearmed was. I'm craving these smaller downloadable games at the moment, if only to get away from the vacuous storytelling and inconsistencies of a lot of the big 3D titles these days. Ebb and flow...
Game of the Month: Trine

Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game. **Brain Drain:** Against all odds, I like Dragon Quest IX. I was prepared to hate it—a giant handheld step backwards, multiplayer, two years of ominous delays, no speaking protagonists. And yet... it's Dragon Quest, through and through. Pretend VIII never happened, ignore the multiplayer, and DQIX is exactly what I'd expect from a new entry in the series: Pure RPG comfort food. I'll review it next month.
Game of the Month: Dragon Quest IX

Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me... **Brain Drain:** One day mankind is going to figure out virtual reality, so you can stand in your living room with compact head gear and disappear into impossibly realistic worlds—without tripping over furniture and breaking your neck. And as we become VR slaves, robots will take over the world.
Game of the Month: Aion

Heather Anne Campbell
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.
Brain Drain: Comic-Con has peaked. There's no way that it can maintain the unchecked growth it's exhibiting; the bubble will burst, and there will be backlash. You can't cram Twilight fans into the same hall as Roddenberry enthusiasts, next to Disney kids, across from Gwar fans. A nerd war is coming. (And geeks hating geeks is a pitiful thing, considering nerds know better than beauty queens what it's like to be judged.)
Game of the Month: Scribblenauts

Matt Cabral
EIC: Play Online

Modus Operandi: I can appreciate both score and score-less reviews, and believe they can absolutely coexist in our industry. I love to read—and often re-read—a well-written critique within the insightful pages of Play just as much as the next gamer. But sometimes, my Facebook-addicted, YouTube-surfing, iced coffee-swilling side craves the quick-hit satisfaction of a big fat number. Besides, have you ever tried reading a full review on an iPhone while driving? That's why playmagazine.com will host the same great review content from the magazine, with the addition of our classic 1-10 numbered scale. Plus, it gives us a voice on those sales-steering aggregate sites.
Brain Drain: Where are all the vampire titles? With the success of Twilight and True Blood, you'd think we'd be treated to a coffin load of bloodsucker-themed games. Let's start with a Bloodrayne reboot!
Game of the Month: Batman: Arkham Asylum

Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

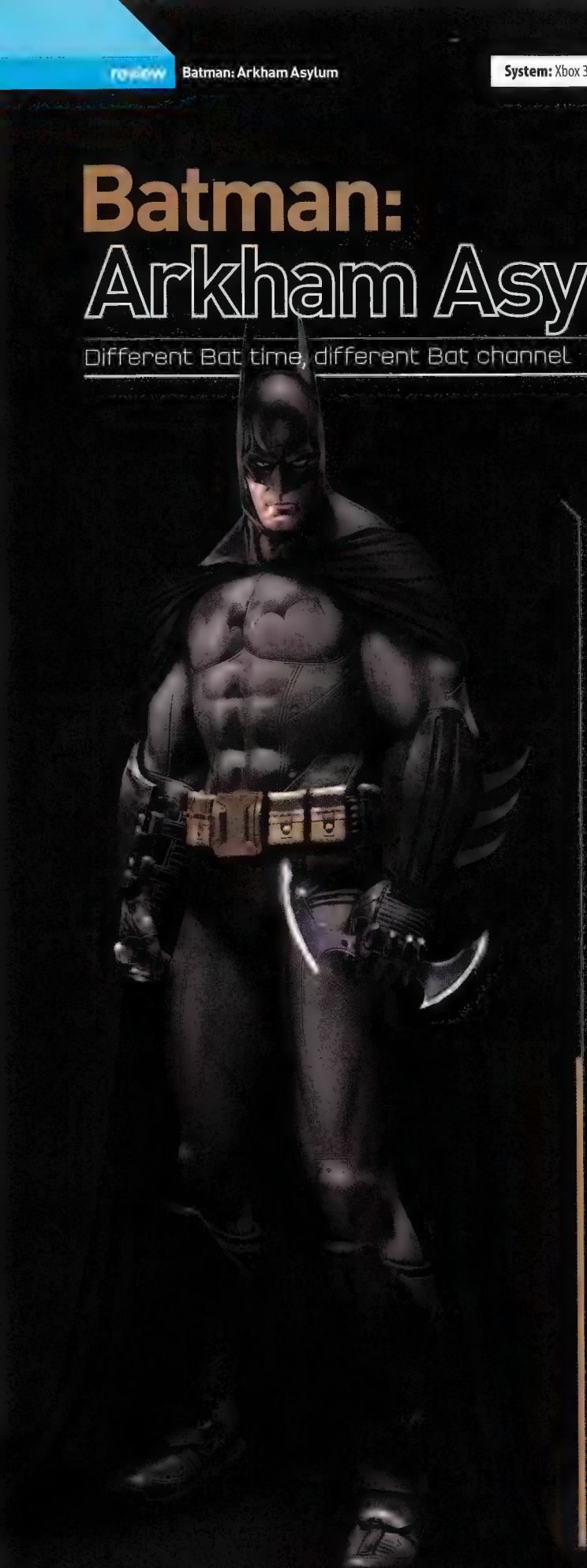
Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.
Brain Drain: Playing through Mass Effect (I know, I'm late) makes me wonder how, in this day and age, we can still have games with terrible user interfaces. Equipment management shouldn't be this much of a struggle, and I shouldn't have such a hard time figuring out what to buy for which teammate. It's frustrating that such a great game can have such unnecessary flaws.
Game of the Month: Art Style: Boxlife

System: Xbox 360, PS3, PC **Developer:** Rocksteady **Publisher:** Eidos/Warner Bros. **ESRB:** Teen **Available:** August 25

Batman: Arkham Asylum

Different Bat time, different Bat channel

words Dave Halverson



Like the films that ushered in the A-list superhero yarn before slipping into a live-action cartoon coma, the Batman video game property is about to undergo a similar transformation with an emphasis on pleasing—wait for it…the fans. Since 8/16-bit era powerhouse Sunsoft put movie games on the map with sterling NES and Genesis versions of Tim Burton's original Batman, the franchise has bounced all over the gaming spectrum–from polished side-scrolling opuses to repellent 3D excess and everywhere in between. With Batman: Arkham Asylum, Rocksteady/Eidos/Warner Bros. endeavor to soar beyond all previous movie or game iterations and bring about a Christopher Nolan-style reboot in step with fans that have weathered the storm (clutching their graphic novels) and newcomers looking for more than surface sheen and nipple armor. The result is a Metal Gear-meets-Metroid-style action/adventure (with a hint of Tomb Raider) with in-engine storytelling brought to vivid life by outstanding writing and performances wrapped in an engine that manages to stand out among the industry's most esteemed interactive storytellers such as Uncharted 2… Yep, it's that good.

Amidst six giant set-pieces spread over an elaborate Arkham Island hub, the game pits Batman against Joker (voiced with menacing zeal by Mark Hamil), who's latest diabolical scheme includes turning Arkham's resident homicidal maniacs into a mutant army, and killing "Bats" in the process through a demented game of cat and mouse that turns Bruce Wayne's trauma into Batman's worst nightmare. No matter how many times you've seen young Bruce's family slain, you've never seen or experienced it like this, and just about everyone gets their pound of Bat flesh… Bane, Poison Ivy, Killer Croc, Scarecrow, Harley Quinn and more all take a mighty stab at derailing whatever psychosis has caused a chiseled zillionaire to dawn a bat suit and subject himself to cruel and unusual punishment of the very worst kind.

A Metal Gear-meets-Metroid-style action/adventure (with a hint of Tomb Raider).

The gameplay manages to strike several chords that together make beautiful music, molding stealth, fisticuffs, detective work/puzzle solving, exploration and platforming into an amazingly cohesive package. The adventure unfolds in clever bits and pieces as Joker and company attempt to stay one step ahead of Batman, leaving a trail of bodies and a few clues in their wake on par with Batman's ever-widening array of WayneTech gadgetry. Switching to Detective Mode on the fly, the environment becomes bathed in forensic light, revealing trace elements to track Joker's victims and/or reveal inmates, attach points and hidden walls and floors that can be breached by Explosive Gel, one of Batman's many, many wonderful toys (all of which can be upgraded at the player's discretion and figure into the gameplay accordingly).

The game is filled with hidden passages—some passable on the spot, while others reveal thruways to be revisited as your arsenal, and the plot, thicken—and enough Riddler trophies to put you in an asylum. To name but a few of

Batman's gadgets, the Cryptographic Sequencer (which produces a cool real-time dual-analog frequency tuner) allows you to breach otherwise impassable security; the Line-Launcher fires a level grapple line to traverse massive gaps; and the Ultra Bat Claw allows you to attach to and pull down large obstructions. The Batarang can be upgraded to target up to three assailants; become sonically tuned to the frequency of the Suicide Collars worn by Arkham's worst offenders; and/or become an integral part of the combo system. Batman's armor (which shows real damage throughout) can also be strengthened many times over, and the more you upgrade your combos, the more signature moves and finishers you can utilize to ease the pain when the odds are stacked against you. Why risk detection with a glide kick when you can hang inverted from your gargoyle perch and snatch your prey? Arkham's thugs may talk the talk but once Batman is in their midst the stealthier the elimination the more vocally fearful they become. Of course it doesn't help that Joker is constantly demeaning their inferior intellect.

Combat is another strong suit. Using "Square" to attack, "X" to evade, and "Triangle" to counter in league with the clever visual cues emitted from the inmates' mental state, the fighting takes on a fantastic rhythm, especially during boss encounters where you're forced to fight off thugs, stun charging behemoths with your Batarang, run, and evade. Between the open-area grappling, fighting, and environmental puzzle solving, the action component alone would make this a must-own Batman game, but paired with the amazing real-time story, Arkham Asylum becomes much, much more. If you've been waiting for the quintessential movie, comic-book, or super-hero game transformation to drop, behold Arkham Asylum.

Batman himself, played with chilling calm-

Batman, played with chilling calm-under-pressure by Kevin Conroy, comes across exactly as he should.

Detective Mode
Use the zoom mode to select an individual Explosive Gel charge to detonate.
UPGRADE
Structural Weakness
Structurally weak walls will collapse with a controlled explosion.
Zoom
Explosive Gel
Detonate RB
Spray Explosive Gel RT

Detective mode +explosive gel=yet another secret area to explore.

under-pressure by Kevin Conroy, comes across exactly as he should; unyielding to a disturbing degree, so resolute in his pursuit of justice that the pain and agony being thrust upon him only serves to empower his ultimate wrath. Likewise, the Joker is evil incarnate—a homicidal maniac able to kill unconscionably and indiscriminately… except for "Bats" of course, whom he lives to torture. I'd love to say more but spoilers be damned on this one. Let's just say that Batman is in for one really, really long night.

Visually, Arkham Asylum is simply a marvel to behold, the product of not wanting to be good, or even great, but the absolute best. Rocksteady and their publishers go where precious few journey in search of visual perfection, and the results are stunning. Rummage around the odd office or cell and you will find individual fine detail weeks or months in the making; facial animation, including tongues, teeth, eyelids, and natural expression, abound on key characters (and look very good on the bit players); clothing moves, lays, and is textured with great care; and everything is modeled to perfection from the chairs in Arkham Mansion to the body bags in the Intensive Treatment ward. One need only gaze at the Poison Ivy model to realize you're in the company of greatness. The first time you come across her in her cell, do yourself a favor and zoom in… Behold the state of her hair, and the way her legs and feet conform to her position on the floor. You just don't see models of this quality, let alone for a supporting character, although Ivy's is arguably the best boss. To think that she exists within impeccably textured and lit environments filled with similarly well-modeled characters is humbling to say the least. When this generation shines, it gives off a blinding light.

Let's just say that Batman is in for one really, really long night.

What don't I like? Well, I did find a couple puzzling choices in the story/flow (you'll know when you get there) and my inner jury is still out on the ending. The last act gets a big mutated thumbs up, but dropping me back in to the world after the finale (the game uses an auto-save), unable to replay the final battle once I unearth more WayneTech (I finished the game with a 68% completion), I found a bit off-putting. It's no big deal though—given the games 20+ hour size, benchmark tech, design, and real-time intrigue it's barely a drop of guano in the ointment. My personal "ultimate" Batman would be the modern-day Batman equivalent of Symphony of the Night, developed by Treasure with character designs by Simon Bisley, penned by Frank Miller, but I want a flying car too. Arkham is ten times the Batman I thought I'd ever see on the heels of EAs workmanlike movie adaptation. That a category 5 blockbuster based on the comic book mythos penned by Paul Dini exists at all is borderline miraculous, so leave now or the joke's on you. play

parting shot

The King of Fighters XII

Filled with fight, but not king just yet

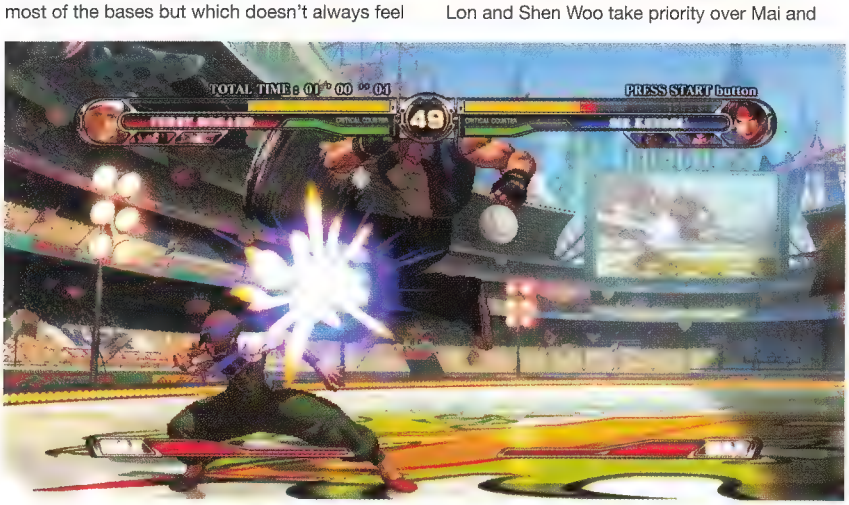
words Eric L. Patterson

How long have I been waiting for this game? First answer might be "since it was originally announced," but that's untrue. I've been waiting for The King of Fighters XII for probably the last ten years; I just didn't know in what form it would come, or if it would even come at all.

At its core, KOF XII is a peculiar game. This "rebirth" of the King of Fighters series might actually be explained better by calling it a "re-set," as all of the rules and regulations of what a KOF title should or shouldn't be have been erased from some blackboard buried deep in SNK Playmore HQ. The game engine is sound, and solid, and satisfying, but also feels simpler than you may be used to. The roster last seen in KOF XI has been decimated, and in its place is a selection of 22 character choices that covers most of the bases but which doesn't always feel logical. And, in a nod to the legacy of the series, many of those characters have reverted back to their previous selves as far as their move rosters go; a choice that, to be honest, feels less like welcome nostalgia and more like regression.

The problem is, had KOF XII not had the legacy of the KOF series to live up to, had it been a fresh new property just now seeing the light of day, it would have been a quality—if not a somewhat quaint—new fighting game offering. When, instead, this is the title that is to kick off not only a new era of KOF, but SNK Playmore as well, I can't help but think that this game feels less like a project worthy of that responsibility and more like a beta for The King of Fighters XIII. Four years in development, and single player is nothing more than a time-trial mode? Four years, and no boss? Characters like Duo Lon and Shen Woo take priority over Mai and K'? (I swear SNK, if you try to sell them to us as paid DLC, there are going to be riots.) One of the most anticipated and monumental fighting games SNK ever releases, and none of the shockingly small roster of backgrounds are even a freakin' Osaka stage?!

> **"I wanted, with all of my heart, to love The King of Fighters XII..."**



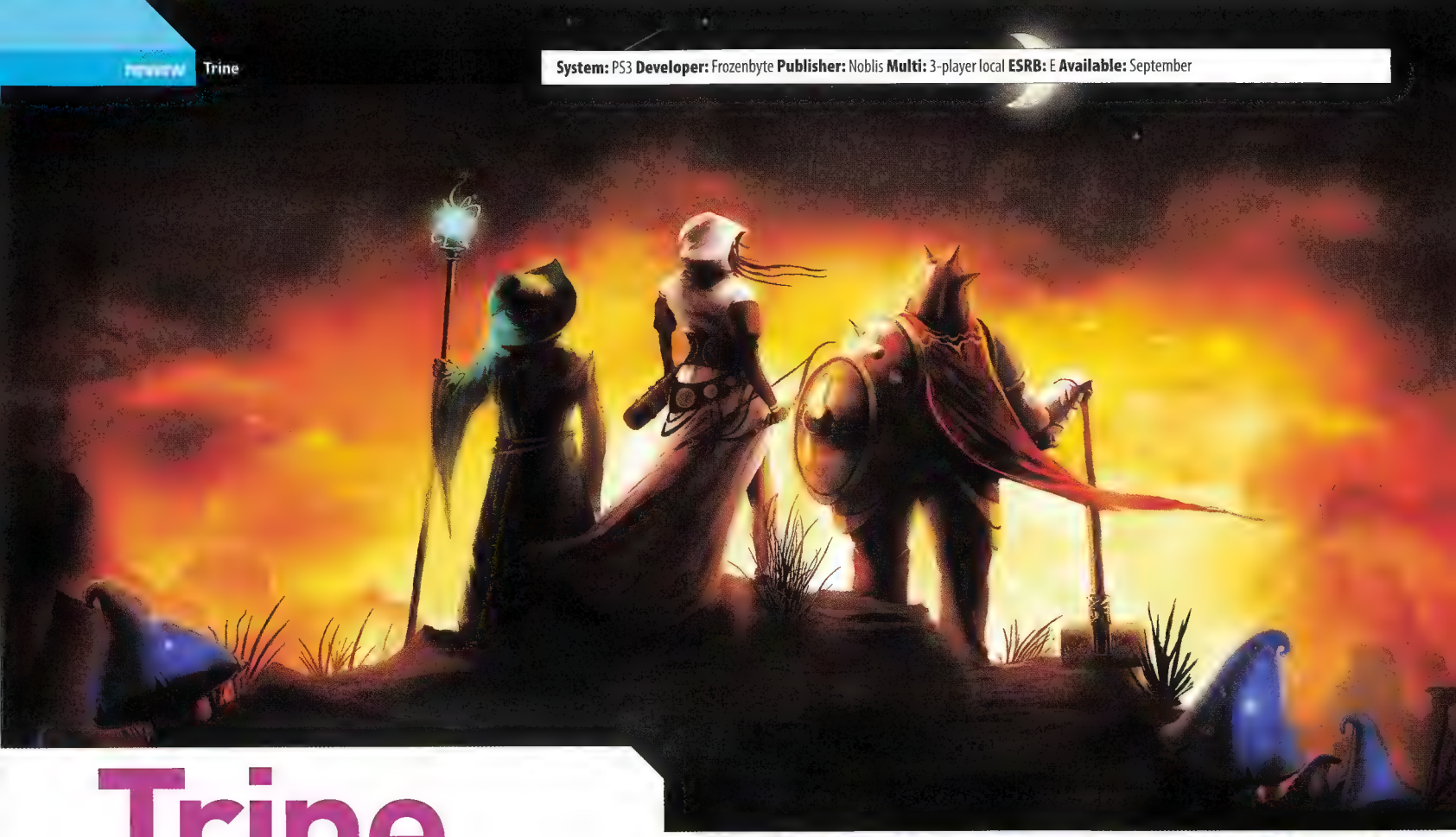
G(entsai)-I(i-treating)-Joe

I wanted, with all of my heart, to love The King of Fighters XII; and, to be fair, in many ways I do, because it is a new KOF title that is both enjoyable and utterly beautiful. However, I cannot overlook the fact that this isn't the game that SNK Playmore should have given us as the rebirth of their most important series. With so many areas of the package feeling incomplete, unfinished, or simply ignored, the positive aspects of KOF XII are far too easily tainted by its disappointing ones.

Important note: As of this writing, the online netcode for The King of Fighters XII is quite unstable, with lag in matches often being so bad (even over good connections) that the game is unplayable. SNK Playmore and Ignition have promised patches to help fix this (and other issues), but as of press time those patches are not yet available. A final judgement on the game will obviously hinge on if the online issues are fixed or not; so, check for my updates KOF XII review on our website once the final fate of the game's online is fully known. play

parting shot

System: PS3 **Developer:** Frozenbyte **Publisher:** Noblis **Multi:** 3-player local **ESRB:** E **Available:** September



Trine

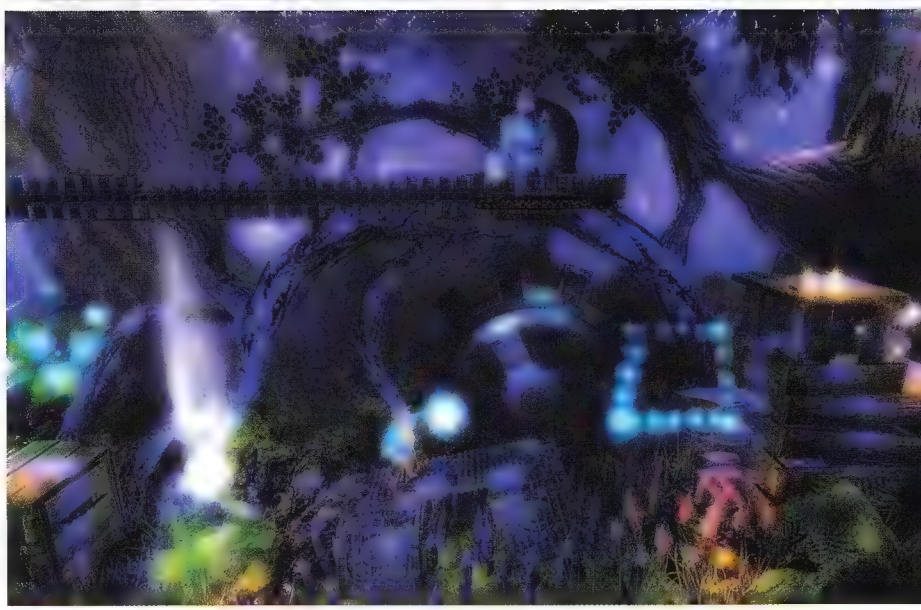
True fantasy

words Brady Fiechter

Open note to the makers of Trine and those who gave the green-light to its creation: thank you! Thank you for making a game that takes us back to the spirit of early gaming, when the experience was more about concise mechanics and simple pleasures than bombast and complexity. To call Trine nostalgic is pleasing truth, but its value is more than a throwback to the 2D era of game design. Look closer and you see a game that excites because it's just great at what it does, in any time, while reaching into the treasure trove of what makes video games sparkle: the soul of adventure.

Trine introduces the comforting fantasy trio of a knight, a wizard, and a thief, who, trapped inside a singular soul, are tasked with retrieving the ancient artifact known as the trine. This magical object is, of course, powerful, dire, and dare not fall into evil hands. As the game began to unravel and the story was sprinkled over lovely storybook stills, I couldn't help but smile lovingly, as the omniscient narrator spoke of peril and the rich lay of the land. It was fairytale time, pure and unpretentious, and I was hooked, like a little wide-eyed boy tucked in for story time. Such emotion is Trine's wellspring.

Our three heroes work as one unit. Each character can be utilized at any time, working in tandem throughout the entire journey. It's largely up to you how you want to approach the obstacle ahead, and while one hero's strengths might make an area easier to tackle, a personal play style is more important than figuring out



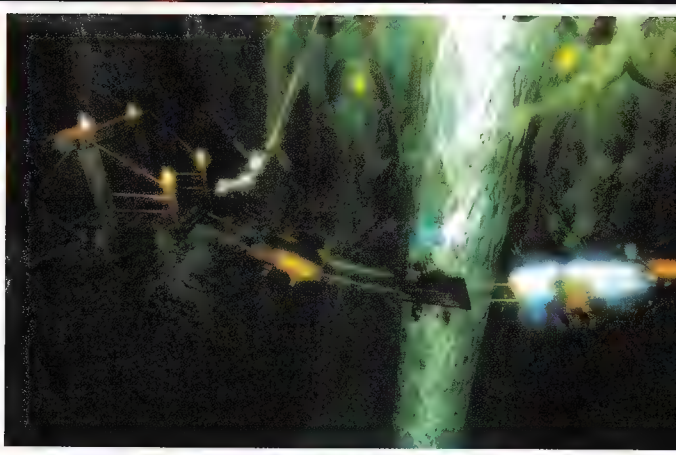
rigid puzzles that persistently demand a specific character to solve. If you see a box in front of you, the aggressive knight might hack it to pieces, but the wizard and his levitation powers are no less effective in pushing the impediment out of the way. As our heroes evolve—the experience system is slight but satisfying—enhanced skills bump up technique, offering us more ways to approach a situation: build a spinning platform, switch to the thief, launch up with her zip line, draw a clock-works crate on the ledge to the left, jump up to safety, go forth to the next hazard. The progression is horizontally dominated, mostly side-scroller in the most exacting sense of the definition, demanding that you are examining the details in your immediate space.

The idea of offering on-the-fly character switching in a platformer is often extraneous, more gimmick than logical design. Trine is not immune to the pitfalls of having to go back and forth between character types, but here the process is handled exceptionally well and makes more sense since you can play the game with two friends, which is a blast and only one more excuse to give Trine additional playthroughs. One caveat, though, rises out of the wizard's limited attack capabilities; his only offensive is the smooth but feeble ability to draw out his boxes to drop on the enemy. There is an argument here on balance issues, but too

Thank you for making a game that takes us back to the spirit of early gaming...

much about Trine overcomes this minor nick.

The Thief is clearly the most useful of the three heros, her powerful arrows taking out the enemy from afar, lighting tortures once the fire upgrade is earned, and—my favorite ability of all the characters—casting a grapple line to wooden objects to swing, jump and rappel through the world. Mind you, this is a pint-sized world, played out on a traditional 2D plane that balks at fancy cameras or shifting perspectives. The beauty is in the restraint as much as the gorgeous, painterly new-age canvases, aglow with high-fantasy. This game is transfixing with light and color, dreamlike in its tone.



Trine's gameplay is largely memorable for its platforming and problem solving. The puzzles often rely on manipulating the world—stabilizing and creating platforms, moving devices and tossing around blocks. You aren't ruminating over complex scenarios, merely designing extensions on the absorbing path before you. By touching the world through the physics, a task that might normally seem routine becomes meaningful.

The game feels a tad soft—same complaint goes for Little Big Planet—but you settle in right away and forget the slight imprecision. Drawing the bow, the way it expands the arc with tension, and swinging the sword, a forceful one-two-three combo, are superbly satisfying, every attack feeling just right. There are way too many skeletons for one game—a lack of varied enemy types becomes weary toward the end—but I can't fault the fun of crumbling them to their death.

Trine nails the details. There is something a little special here, a little unexpected and removed from even those superb games that recall the past like Bionic Commando: Rearmed or Braid. I feel like I just played a Sega CD game for the first time. play

Contender for one of the prettiest games of the year.

parting shot

[redacted]

System: Xbox360 **Developer:** ChAIR **Publisher:** Microsoft (XBLA) **ESRB:** Teen **Available:** August

Shadow Complex

Nowhere to hide...

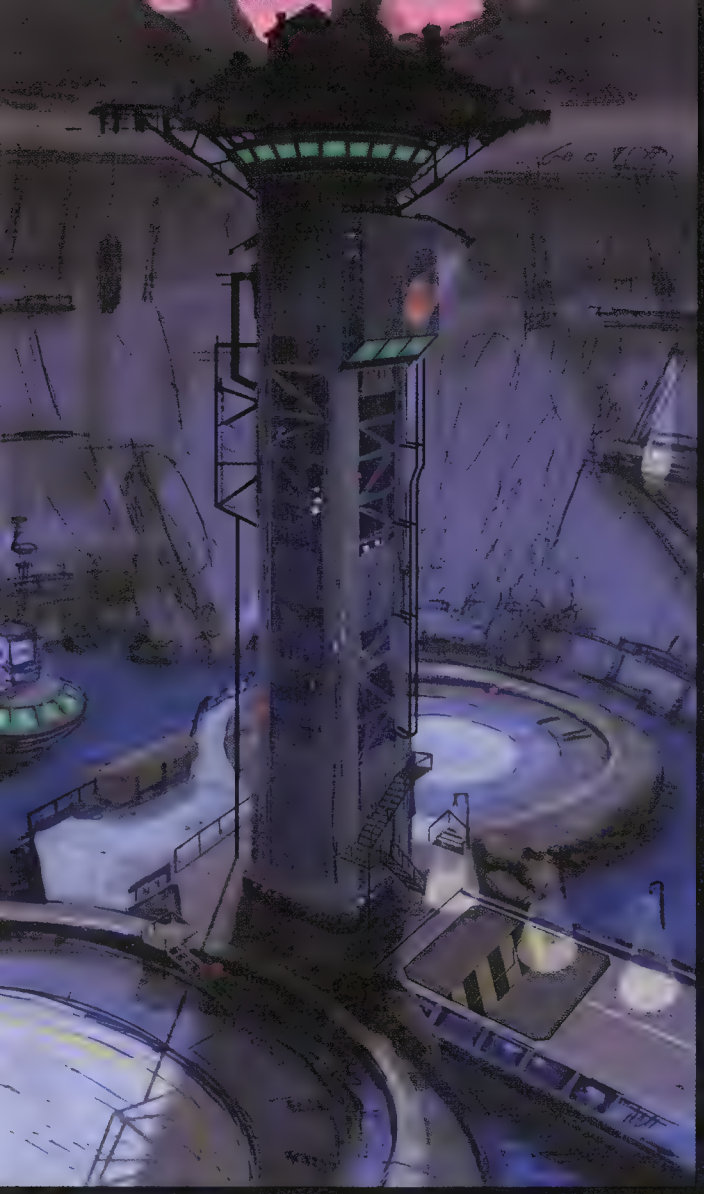
I like the way ChAIR thinks. I may not agree with *every* decision they make, but when it comes to game design, we're at least on the same chapter. The idea of a story-driven Super Metroid-style side-scrolling XBLA game with a big enough budget to give it some serious tech, is, well...the dream. It's the game that I've been waiting to play.

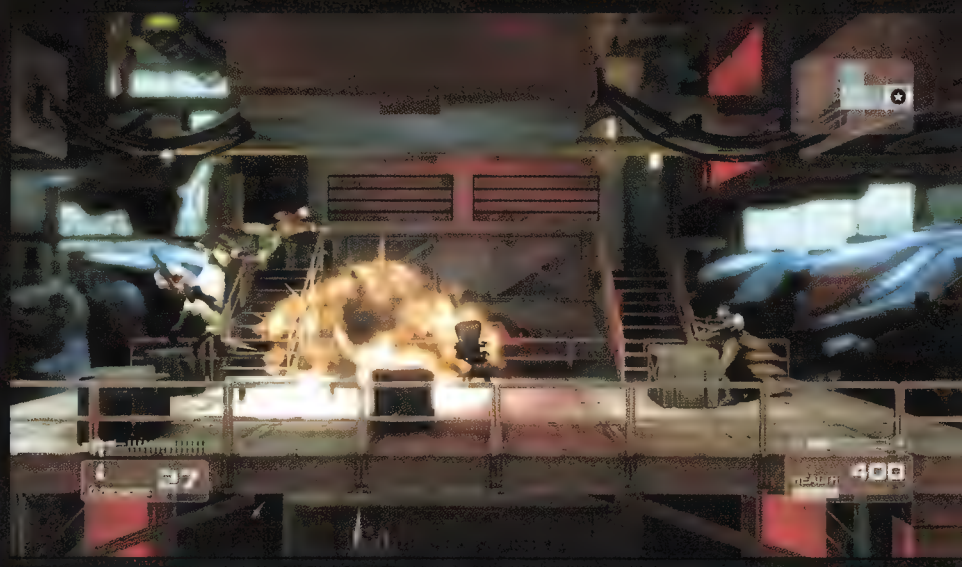
But why? I savored every minute of Super Metroid many times over and have scoured every inch of Castlevania: Symphony of the Night—the personification of the strain—on three separate consoles; what's my motivation for wanting yet another game cut from the same cloth? Can such a simple formula be so exhilarating? That's just it—the fact that something so simple can be so intoxicating is what keeps me coming back for more. It's a huge payoff for minimal effort. I know exactly what to expect from the gameplay, it's the ambience I'm after. But is it really that simple?

Quite the contrary—the simpler the concept the more difficult to hit the mark I say. When you're essentially combing over one gigantic 2D map, painstakingly retracing your steps to acquire the necessary components to breach previously impassable barriers to root out whatever evil lurks within, there isn't much room for error. What makes Super Metroid and Castlevania so addicting is a combination of impeccable world design and supernatural nuance, driven by the perfect music and the allusion to a deeper story. Essentially all the places Shadow Complex stumbles. By basing their game in the plausible reality of a politically charged thriller, ChAIR bear the burden of creating real intrigue in a game where it need only be implied.

After witnessing the abduction of his girlfriend by heavily armed militia, I can almost buy Jason having the courage to stroll into a heavily fortified installation—it is a game after all—but where's that courage when he's watching her captor smash her in the face, closed fist, so hard that in real life (which this is supposed to be) her jaw would be shattered... "Oh no, Claire"? That's the best he can do? Then two minutes later he's channeling John McLane? It just doesn't gel. Nothing is left to the imagination in Shadow Complex either. It's a thriller without thrills; a puzzle with no pieces. There's never any real sense of caring, danger, peril, or mystery. You're a rat in a maze, eliminating faceless goons that divulge useless information on cue about a revolution we care nothing about. We already know that the wacko in the Rocketeer mask that still uses an intercom wants to reboot America. When do I get to settle into some atmospheric gameplay and square off against some formidable foes?

The massive base makes a wonderful playground and ChAIR have loaded it with great action puzzles..





WMD. Once you've amassed the Thrust Pack, Omega Armor, SCHCA Mask, Friction Dampener—running at supersonic speed is a blast—WSAR60 Coil Rifle, Foam, Missiles, and the Grappling Hook, Shadow Complex is at its best as a multi-faceted action maze assault. Forget about the map and the mission and just play for 100% completion. The massive base makes a wonderful playground and ChAIR have loaded it with great action puzzles, supersonic gauntlets, surprise boss mecha, and some fantastic underwater exploration. It's also absolutely gorgeous from top to bottom—I especially dig the outer rim—and once you've slipped on the suit the character design is awesome, not to mention completely dynamic to the environment.

It's ironic: with Advent Rising, Donald and Jeremy Mustard nailed the story and fell short on the visual; and now with Shadow Complex the opposite applies. I say it's time to make Advent Rising Complex. They've got the story, the tech, and the engine. What could possibly go wrong? play

parting shot

Shadow Complex is at its best as a multi-faceted action maze assault...

System: Wii **Developer:** Retro Studios **Publisher:** Nintendo **ESRB:** T **Available:** August 24

Metroid Prime Trilogy

Triple threat

words Brady Fiechter

Playing Metroid Prime again after seven years and a major changing of the technology guard, I'm struck by just how well Retro Studios was able to distill the spirit of Metroid while working with rather primitive 3D tools and experience, and on a canvas entirely removed from the 16-bit classic. This is the most satisfying and complete of the three Metroid Primes. Don't agree? Well, you can decide for yourself without breaking the bank: 50 bucks gets you the entire Prime series in one package—Metroid Prime Trilogy.

50 bucks gets you the entire Prime series in one package...

Metroid Prime 2: Echoes is the black sheep of the bunch. It's a good game in many regards and extends a lot of what made Metroid Prime hum, but the reliance on a dark/light mechanic as its central theme is overwrought and just not that great in execution. It's required playing for Metroid nuts, satisfying as the middle chapter in this trilogy, but move onto Prime 3: Corruption and you're in for that same exceptional craft and artistry that powers Prime 1.

Metroid Prime 3: Corruption came at an awkward time, when 360 and PS3 were in an exciting, virginal state of scintillation and some of us weren't quite ready to embrace the Wii. Accustomed to the typical gritty realism and real-world aesthetic employed by so many rival games, Metroid Prime 3 seems even more relevant now, in its slightly aged state, revealing an absorbing world dominated by color and shape over a sophistication of detail. The game is less retro and more an entirely unique experience, one built on a framework of fantasy and traditional gamemaking.

What I really love about these games is their reliance on more pattern-based action shooting elements over first-person run and gun strategizing. All three games are built on adventure, establishing nifty puzzles and little platforming touches like Samus' terrifically fun ball mechanic. And with Metroid Prime 3, you are getting one of the better games of the year, and one of the more overlooked games of its time. I know a lot of people, myself included, who didn't give it a fair shake when it debuted on Wii. Granted, it's not typical in today's scene, and that's part of its fantastic appeal.

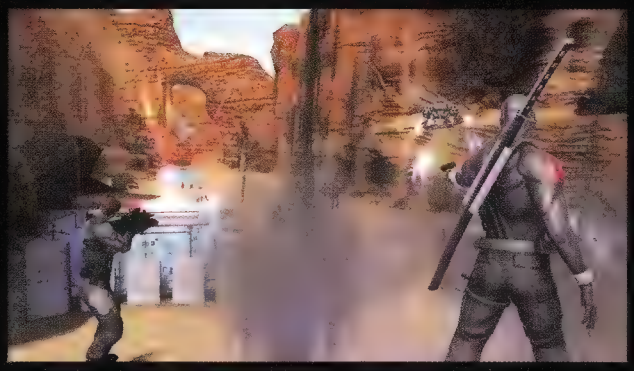
The big additions worth mentioning to the first two Primes in this trilogy are a wide-screen presentation—yes!—and the reworking of the controls to fit with the Wii Remote—not sure I'm sold. I have yet to praise a Wii game for benefiting from motion control, but Prime's more space-shooter presentation avoids the ambiguity of connection to the space so often created on Wii. Debate amongst yourselves the merits here. What's most important is you get a collection of superb action-adventure Metroids that are an admirable interpretation of one of the most respected early-era titles in gaming. play

parting shot

G.I. Joe
The Rise of Cobra

Not your average Joe

words Matt Cabral



Good guys wear black, right Snake Eyes?

Try as I might to approach every new game without any preconceived biases, I couldn't help but hold some reservations going into EA's movie-tied G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra. I mean, more than most, I actually appreciate licensed titles for what they are, but one based on a summer film, based on a bunch of plastic crap that cluttered toy store aisles in the '80s (sorry, I was a Star Wars action figure fan), definitely had me skeptical.

Well, shame on me; it took all of about 90 seconds for my concerns to be washed away and replaced by a satisfying sense I hadn't been stung with since lining tokens along the marquees of arcade cabinet classics such as Ikari Warriors and Contra. Yep, Joe's simple, yet addictive and accessible third-person action totally hearkens back to the quarter-munching days of old. Its varied, colorful environments—snow-covered forests, sun-soaked deserts, lush jungles, urban battlefields—littered with power-ups and lined with goons to target and stuff to blow up, fast-paced firefights, and same-screen co-operative play, almost allow you to forget you're not clutching a grimy joystick and hammering away on big red buttons.

The Cobra cackle that played upon my death clobbered me with the nostalgia stick.

But it's not just the obvious arcadey call-outs that make this one tick. Smaller touches, like the rousing spike in theme music every time you equip the Accelerator Suit—granting your Joe temporary battlefield-clearing invincibility—or the very visible scores being tallied in the upper right and left hand corners of the screen, also give it some welcome old school cred. For me, it was the menacing Cobra cackle that played upon my untimely deaths, recalling the similarly sinister laugh from Rolling Thunder's (one of my all-time arcade faves) "game over" screen, that totally clobbered me with the nostalgia stick.

Of course, despite all this thumb-blistering appeal, Joe isn't a token-siphoning classic, but a fresh entry with the horsepower of current-gen hardware behind it. So, while you shouldn't expect a Gears of War-like production, it does flavor its arcade aesthetic with modern amenities like pilotable vehicles, destructible cover, and the ability to call in air strikes. Oh, and there's also that whole "G.I. Joe" thing. I wasn't much of a fan; my appreciation for the franchise began and ended with a Snake Eyes action figure, and I only played with it because I was obsessed with ninjas as a kid. Anyway, more faithful followers will no doubt find even more to love here, like 16 playable characters (12 Joe, four Cobra), complete with character-specific primary and secondary weapons, and fan-pleasing unlockables, including some of those now-classic PSAs.

Joe piles the fun high, but it's also got its share of flaws. The fixed camera can occasionally be a bear; the targeting, which grants very limited player control, is sometimes wonky; and the co-op is offline only. I have little doubt many critics will harp on these shortcomings and see the flaws over the fun. However, if you're looking for a licensed title that forgoes the usual restrictions of the genre in favor of accessible, joystick-jockeying thrills, then Joe's your go-to guy.

parting shot

preview Nostalgia

System: NDS **Developer:** Tecmo/Red/Matrix **Publisher:** Ignition Ent. **ESRB:** E10+ **Available:** September 22

Nostalgia

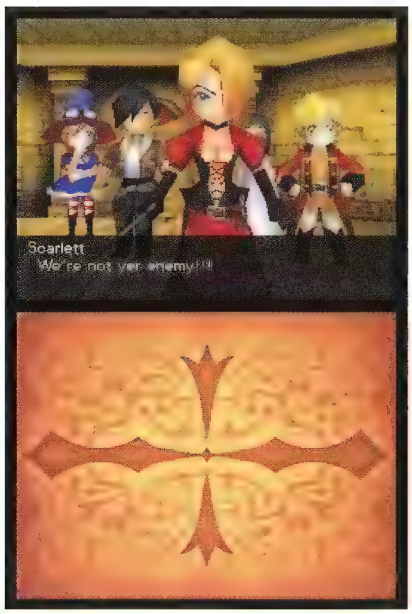
The best a man can get

words Dave Halverson

A "Man in Armor" is harassing a beautiful girl that appears to be of sacred blood, standing over a glowing artifact somewhere in Cairo when one of his hooded subordinates flings off his cloak… It's Gilbert Brown! (A dead ringer for Indiana Jones with a moustache). "No way I'm letting those thugs get their hands on you!" Narrowly escaping the powerful Man in Armor as they sail away on Gilbert's waiting airship, the last shot grazes the rope from which he dangles and he plummets into the ocean! "Aaaahhhh…."

Back in jolly old London, his young son Edward vows to become an adventurer and find his father—you go young Edward—but we all know it isn't that easy. You don't just become an adventurer; there's a process. First you must visit the Adventurer's Guild and take the exam. What exam? Exterminating the monster rats in the sewers of course! Were you born yesterday? Get your butt over to the weapon shop and buy a cheap sword, then the armor shop, and then the item shop. Be sure to stop by the pub too, and make sure you speak to the girl standing at the entrance to the sewer. Her friend went down there in pursuit of a rat that stole his medal and she'd appreciate it very much if you'd help him if you happen to bump into him. Heading into the sewer, turned-based rat extermination ensues, until you stumble upon her friend. Pad is the name and shooting rats with his revolver is the game—I love JRPGs; kids get guns and go off blasting monsters, it's the life! … But there are just too many. Cue the 5-rat strong battle! But of course, even though you've saved his hide, Pad takes one look at the obviously pampered Edward and wants

I love JRPGs; kids get guns and go off blasting monsters, it's the life!



nothing to do with him. Maybe he'll have a change of heart and join the party when he meets up with the 8-foot tall 300-pound fanged bipedal rat wearing his medal. We may even have to heal.

Back at Adventurer's HQ, it's time to collect your Adventurer's Notebook and what's this? Mr. Evans was looking for me? Meet him at the Airship Dock? Sweet! Airship time already? That's right Edward; the blokes have repaired your dad's trusty air ship, The Maverick! Real-time map flying and turn-based air battles are yours for the taking! Cairo here we come!

Yes indeed, it's traditional JRPG gaming to the core, but by god, is it ever the perfect amalgam of the strain. Brought to life by Tecmo's Keisuke Kikuchi, Red Entertainment's Naoki Morita, and Matrix Software (made up of members of Climax Entertainment and Telnet Japan), Nostalgia is a JRPG player's dream come true. Set in an alternate reality steampunk version of the 19th Century, the game follows Edward as he travels the world in his customizable airship The Maverick in search of his missing father. After Pad, he hooks up with a witch named Melody and the mysterious Feona, and off they go to New York City, Cairo, Tokyo, Northern Europe, and South America. The character design, cinematography—yes cinematography, this is the real deal—music, and world design are all absolutely top quality here. In fact, although I've just begun playing I can already tell that Nostalgia is going to be an epic on par with the likes of Skies of Arcadia, FF VII, and Wild Arms. This is the most excited I've been about a conventional turn-based RPG since Blue Dragon. Review forthcoming, as if you need it. play

System: NDS **Dev:** Hit Maker **Pub** NIS America Inc. **Multi:** 1 player **ESRB:** RP **Avail:** October

A Witch's Tale

Welcome to A Witch's Tale!

Have you ever wondered what lies beneath the earth's crust? I mean it's a big planet. For all we know there could be an entire society of witches living right under our noses. Witches that invaded our world a millennium ago, lead by an evil queen that started toasting us like so many English Muffins before our mystical savior, Alice, appeared and zapped them back from whence they came. Think about it.

...Liddel is a spunky, devious little witch that would rather rummage around a dusty old library than go to school where her stupid classmates who only care about pop-stars and fashion practice magic for babies. She'd much rather berate a crusty old witch named Babayaga until she reveals the location of the forbidden magic sealed away 1,000 years ago; and then rouse the vampire who's been guarding it until she ultimately unleashes its evil once again. Looks like we'll be putting the genie back in the bottle when Hit Maker's first DS game hits this September. I was only able to spend a few minutes with the actual game before press time but so far, wow, this is an amazingly polished action-RPG with some great banter, and stunning visuals. Stay tuned for the review next month. **Dave Halverson**

An amazingly polished action-RPG with some great banter, and stunning visuals.

Which witch is witch?

preview **System:** NDS **Developer:** 5th Cell **Publisher:** Warner Bros. Interactive **ESRB:** E10+ **Available:** September 15

Scribblenauts

Come with me, and you'll be, in a world of pure imagination.

words Heather Anne Campbell & Eric L. Patterson

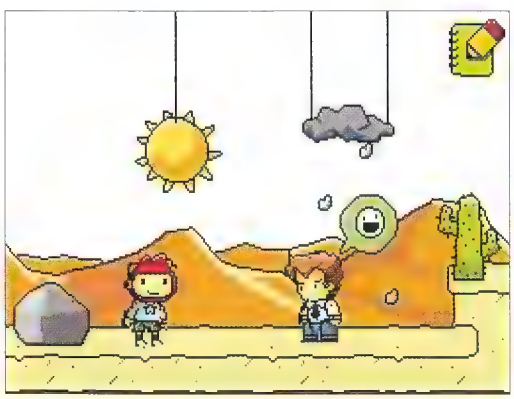
Heather Anne Campbell: As readers may or may not know, Scribblenauts is a game where a boy named Maxwell has to solve puzzles by employing objects that the player writes into a virtual notepad.

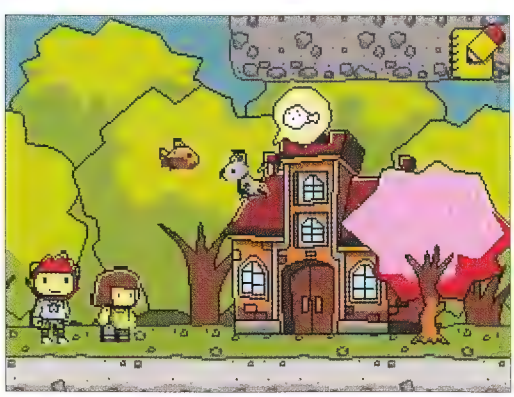
Eric L. Patterson: It's, I guess, sort of the like Death Note, but in reverse... a "Life Note," if you will. You aren't employing objects that already exist in any one puzzle; you're creating into the world whatever you can think of from what exists in the overall Scribblenauts universe.

HAC: Additionally, each object has simple A.I. and physics.

ELP: Right. So animals will walk around, pissed off animals will fight each other, animals on skateboards will roll down hills, and so on.

HAC: How did you beat the first puzzle? There is a Starite atop a tree, and Maxwell has to fetch the Starite. The "par" for the stage is three, but the player receives bonuses for non-violent solutions, simple solutions, etc.





I kept thinking of Jurassic Park while I was playing.

ELP: My solution was pretty low-level: I used a boomerang to knock the Starite down.

HAC: I believe I used a fishing pole. A beaver was used in my E3 demo, and once the beaver was brought to life, it chewed the tree down.

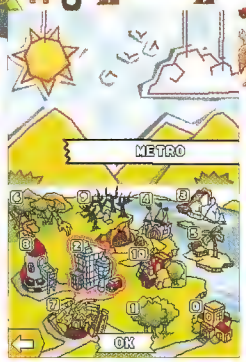
ELP: I think there's no better example of the possibilities of the game than this very basic first puzzle. For example, I also conjured up a lumberjack and gave him a chainsaw. The next time, I called forth a bed, and jumped on it to reach my goal.

HAC: I kept thinking of Jurassic Park while I was playing; how simplicity can give rise to extreme complication. It is possible, for example, to put several pandas on a unicycle, and climb on top of them to get the star down.

ELP: The Jurassic Park link makes me laugh considering how my style of play went at first. Sure, I could call forth God to kill the piranhas that fill the water below the Starite that I'm trying to reach–and that's exactly what I did–but I never really stopped to think if I should. I sometimes felt like I was killing flies with a bazooka, because I found it the easier path to take versus really thinking things out. But, that's part of the beauty of the game; it allows you to play your way.

HAC: There's often something uncomfortable about Scribblenauts. There was a puzzle where a dog blocked a sand pit, and I kept trying to figure out how to get past the dog without slaying it ... but in the end, would just pop a gun into Maxwell's hands, and have him put the pup down.

ELP: I was trying to find the best non-violent way to solve problems, but sometimes, I just gave up and did the same. It's funny, but in a way, Scribblenauts feels far more the "open sandbox" game than something like GTA IV does, and I felt far guiltier when I resorted to certain solutions here than I did in almost any other game I can recall.



HAC: Agreed!

ELP: Most of all, though, Scribblenauts is about imagination. There are very few games that really push people to use their imagination, and I think that's the reason the game has gotten as much attention as it has. It's never about a set solution to a problem, but instead, seeing just how interesting you can make your path to the goal.

HAC: If GTA is a sandbox, then Scribblenauts is a game of Calvinball. You invent the rules as you go along, and players with the most creative solutions reward themselves by seeing their schemes unfold. play

System: PSP **Developer:** Square Enix **Publisher:** Square Enix **Multi:** Vs, Trading **ESRB:** T **Available:** Now

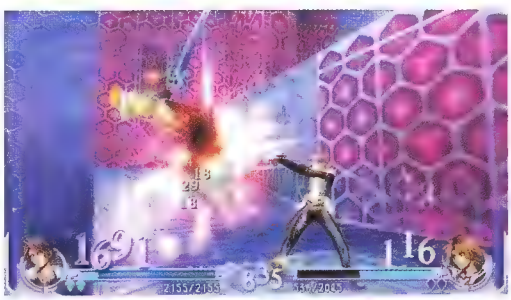
Dissidia: Final Fantasy REVIEW

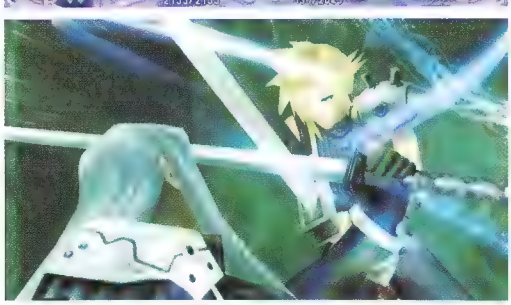
Dissidia Final Fantasy

Final Fantasy's Final Fantasy

Dissidia: Final Fantasy is a new kind of game. The nonsense simulator. It simulates absurdity with such obsessive attention that it may, indeed, be the greatest nonsense simulator ever released on any platform. With 50+ hours of exhaustive nonsense to engage, Dissidia invents a vocabulary, insulates itself like a video-game cult, and then expounds on its own invention until the clutter achieves a sort-of zen, becoming science, philosophy, and religion all in one.

Here, listen to this: For eternity, a war has waged between Cosmos, the Goddess of Harmony, and Chaos, the God of Destruction. Recently, the balance of power tipped towards darkness, and so the warriors of Cosmos—each from a Final Fantasy game—unite to fight off the villains of other Final Fantasy games, in an effort to chase down their own *crystal*s, and save the world from destruction. Cosmos, determined to give these heroes an upper hand by *committing suicide*, allows Chaos to defeat her so that her heroes may fight harder.





Thus, these Final Fantasy protagonists head forth to seek their crystals in their Destiny Odysseys, which are montages of action-packed events from their original games, retold via cut-scenes and text-homages—the pace of which is determined by the player's movement on an arbitrary puzzle board that contains no actual puzzles.

To progress along these puzzle boards, the player spends Destiny Points, moving a chess-piece version of their selected character until they encounter crystallized versions of both heroes and villains from the Final Fantasy series, and fight them. Unfortunately, our protagonists cannot do damage to their adversaries until they have depleted his or her Brave Points, or BP. Brave Points are reduced by BP attacks, and once these are lowered to zero, the word BREAK appears in shining letters above the respective characters' gauge, and the opponent can be damaged with Hit Point attacks, known familiarly as HP attacks.

Additionally, EX attacks, available when a player or his adversary has taken enough damage and to fill up their EX gauge, transform the combatants into powered-up versions of themselves, and allows players to engage in Limit-Break style attacks cribbed from the original Final Fantasy games. It should be noted that unlike BP or HP, EX is not short for anything, and simply represents how much EX a character has. Sometimes, characters will encounter Summons along their progress, and once equipped, these demi-gods will appear in battle to provide bonuses in the flashy combat, like doubling a character's EX, BP, or HP.

Square Enix describes this kind of battle as "Dramatic Progressive Action," but I would characterize it as, "Hard-Core, Enthusiast Nonsense Combat."

While you are playing the game, a small bird known to Final Fantasy fans as a Chocobo, moves along a Customization menu that is usually invisible to the player. On certain days of the week, determined in advance by the player, the Chocobo moves faster on this menu, and gives bonuses to the player, randomly. Go ahead, read that again. It makes exactly as much nonsense as it's supposed to.

Each of the heroes has their own mini-story to complete, and upon completion, the player is rewarded with PP, short for PP, which can be used in a main menu to unlock costumes and bonuses for each character. This same menu also gives access to other modes of play, like Arcade mode (a fighting-intensive mode that has no story attached), Duel Colosseum (in which players select opponents from a never-ending *deck of cards*), Quick Battle, and Communications mode (wherein players can fight other Dissidia champions online, and trade Friend Cards to receive additional bonuses). A Calendar tells the player what day it is, what bonuses are active on said day, and Mognet gives the player PP bonuses from letters received by virtual Moogles.

And lest I forget, there are also randomized bonuses included with every battle, every strike of the sword, and every map. A list of these bonuses is available to the player from the customization menu.

All of this well-developed nonsense is extremely well polished, features a fantastic soundtrack, and includes some very expensive CG cut-scenes. Dissidia is a fine and intricate game, made by a great team that had a very specific set of lunacies they wanted to achieve. In Japan, Dissidia is the fourth-best-selling PSP game of all time, due in part to Final Fantasy's rabid fanbase, but aided by Dissidia's extraordinarily large unlockable catalogue that resonates with an obvious love of absurdity. If you multiplied Final Fantasy by itself, this is the game you would produce. It's sugar cereal, fashioned into belt-buckles, played as pop-art. play

Square Enix describes this kind of battle as 'dramatic progressive action,' but I would characterize it as, 'hardcore, enthusiast nonsense combat.'

parting shot

System: PSP **Developer:** Project Soul **Publisher:** Namco Bandai **Avail:** September

SoulCalibur : Broken Destiny

Kratos shows Siegfried and Ivy how it's done.

Soulcaliber's a perfect venue for Kratos' bloody talents.

So, maybe squeezing Force-wielding fighters from a galaxy far, far away into Soul Calibur IV was a bit of a stretch. But how about injecting God of War's Athenian ass-whuppin' Kratos into Namco Bandai's weapons-based brawler? After spending some time behind the Blade of Chaos-wielding baddie in the PSP's upcoming Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny, I'm happy to report the tattooed, skirt-sporting blood spiller makes for a much better fit among the series' colorful characters. Boasting a model ripped right from GoW: Chains of Olympus, and an impressive array of signature brutality-bringin' moves, the Grecian anti-hero is a welcome and fitting addition to the SC series.

Of course, the title is much more than just a spin-off showcase for the pissed off god-slayer. It also packs a full-on, content-brimming SC experience; multiple single and multiplayer modes (but sadly no infrastructure play), over 25 fighters, and a satisfying control scheme that'll be familiar to anyone who mastered SCIV's four-button fight system, make the jump to the PSP. Most impressive though, is the stunning visual presentation. From detail-drenched backgrounds and arenas, to gorgeous character models complete with fluid fighting animations, SC: BD is already looking better than the developer's groundbreaking 2006 portable effort Tekken: Dark Resurrection. God of War fans might flock to this one for the opportunity to tear things up as Kratos, but ultimately, it'll be a rich new entry in the famed frighting franchise that'll keep them clutching their PSPs. **Matt Cabral**

System: NDS **Developer:** h.a.n.d./Square Enix **Publisher:** Square Enix **Avail:** September 29

Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days

Tilde end of time

A few notes from my experience with Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days: A black screen. A slick, ephemeral font reads, "Day 255." Day 255 ... of what? What's important about Day 255? A cut-scene begins: Roxas, side-hero of the Kingdom Hearts series, sits on a Clock Tower, eating Popsicles. There's no context here, no introduction. Soon after, I get this title: Day 8 ~The Icing on the Cake~. What do the tildes mean? No clue. It's been 8 days since ... what, exactly? Here's our hero, Roxas. That's an anagram for Sora, with an "x" thrown in for no good reason. Roxas is introduced to Axel. Axel becomes Roxas' mentor. We're fifteen minutes into a game that has no intention of letting us in. This is ambiguity for it's own sake; a game that covers its plot holes with vagaries that pad the narrative.

Do you remember how Kingdom Hearts started? An island. Children with relationships. A mysterious portal. *That's* how a game starts. Not a 12-character deep introduction, with everyone clad in identical hoodies, followed by fifteen straight minutes until the player can save or interact with anything.

When you finally do get to interact with Kingdom Hearts, you get a jumping tutorial. Again, this is a game that has a twelve-character deep montage/introduction, yet the opening tutorial suggests that the developers were nervous about this game being a player's first. The incongruity between the game's incomprehensible story, and its hand-holding game-play tutorials, suggest a divorce between the writers and the designers that can't be good for the game's execution.

Day 9 ~Heartless~. More tildes. Fashionable, maybe. Hip? I don't know.

This "inter-quel" in the KH series covers the time after Sora became a heartless to save Kairi, giving rise to his Nobody, Roxas. Follow? It's an especially gorgeous game for the DS, something Square Enix is becoming adept at. My time with Kingdom Hearts DS was limited, but my enjoyment of the rest of the series means I'll give it a healthy shot before it hits in late September. Hopefully, this gives you a sense of the tone. Or should I say, "Tone: Depth (heart.s) 1/63~." **Heather Anne Campbell**

System: NDS **Dev:** GungHo **Pub** Aksys Games **Avail:** September 29

Hero's Saga: Laevatein Tactics

More Laevatein, please!

Laevatein was a game I had frankly never heard of–perhaps in part due to it coming from Korean developer GungHo–but it brings back memories of more "classic" SRPG titles like Ogre Battle or Tactics Ogre, at least in terms of the overall style and presentation of the game. This isn't just a retread project, however, as Laevatein offers up a number of interesting concepts, such as capturing bases on battlefields to gain a tactical advantage, a whole host of legendary weapons that unlock super-powerful special abilities in your units, and some nice multiplayer options like character "lending" and versus competition.

It's also interesting to see how Aksys is handling Laevatein's localization; the main characters and their home country, for example, give off something of a Spanish flavor, a refreshing choice given the usual over-use of slathering Old English onto everyone and everything in games like these. **Eric L. Patterson**

Gridrunner Revolution

Saved by the Sheepie

words Mike Griffin

Jeff Minter really does have the golden touch when it comes to classically-styled arcade shooter gameplay, and it's been a labor of love for almost three decades. Most know the Yak for his cult-hit Llamasoft games, like Tempest 2000 and Space Giraffe, and his outstanding music visualization engine, Neon, as seen in the Xbox 360's music player and more recently in Space Invaders Extreme. What you see before you is Gridrunner Revolution, Minter's longest-running project, an expertly-tuned single screen shooter that's been in constant evolution since his early days of VIC-20, Commodore 64 and Atari ST development.

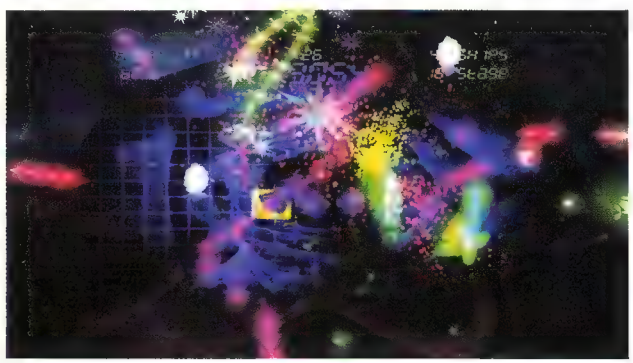
If you boil games down to their ability to elicit physical and sensory feedback, Jeff's shooters are sledgehammers. His agenda is contemporary visual trip out, with skilled, nuanced twitch shooter gameplay—an endless assault of stimulation and reaction. Gridrunner Revolution embraces the latest shaders on PC and Xbox 360 to create thumping, undulating backgrounds beneath the titular grid. Unlike the early Gridrunners on 8 and 16-bit systems (Spoiler: both the Vic and C64 versions are unlockable extras in GR), where you really were navigating a grid, Revolution lets you maneuver one of several little ships all across the screen.

The key points of strategy in Gridrunner Revolution make it a very persuading and addictive shooter. One's left analog stick or mouse moves the ship, while the right stick or mouse buttons 1 & 2 rotate the ship clockwise and counter-clockwise (a *revolution*, not free 360-degree shooting like, say, Geometry Wars). It's pretty straightforward at first: shoot lots of colorful electronic creatures, grab sheep that fall through the screen, power up your shot stream, and collect more ship types. Reminiscent of the flow between waves and levels in Tempest 2K, Gridrunner has a fantastic rhythm and heartbeat (and thanks to a fine partnership with Turbo Recordings, some great acid and techno beats as well).

Gridrunner quickly introduces the Sun and black hole as primary targets. There's a gravity field around these spherical phenomena that curves your bullet streams, and you earn extra points by zapping enemy waves with your stylish shots. This increases the Boost multiplier. You'll also increase a second multiplier as you pick up sheep, which can be raised yet again (into glorious "Hyper Scoring") after you blow up a sun and open the black hole. At higher difficulties the black hole tosses out vicious bullet volleys, so it's really important to boost your shot power early and knock it out as soon as possible. There's usually a nice 1-up in it for you.

The falling sheep aren't just multiplier bonuses. These gently mewling angels are true life savers. In a glorious stroke of game designer love, Gridrunner gives you several seconds to steer your destroyed ship around the screen before it finally drops away and loses you a life; if you manage to collect a sheep during this brief reprieve, you'll be returned to full capacity. There's more to it: With skillful control, your ship wreckage can also bounce off enemies and bullets like a pinball (destroying them in the process), effectively delaying your death at the bottom of the screen as you await the arrival of a savior sheep. Snatch one, and the screen explodes with a rousing "Sheepie Save!" message and all is right in the world again. You'll often chain these intense bounce and save techniques together over and over again, taking advantage of the smart bomb effect that comes with a nice Sheepie Save.

I would heartily recommend skipping a burger combo and buying Gridrunner Revolution when it releases this fall, since you'll live longer and it will cost you about the same. I was especially pleased with the inclusion of the unlockable "Thrusty Mode," emphasizing what is basically a cross between the Asteroids and Missile Command control scheme plus radial shooting, providing a fun and familiar way to replay GR's many clever stages. play



Enemies come from every angle, but the action revolves around the sun and black hole.
or: The action literally revolves around the sun and black hole.

An endless assault of stimulation and reaction.

System: PC **Developer:** Eyedentity Games **Publisher:** Nexon **Available:** 2010

Dragon Nest

Hope whispered in dreams

words Mike Griffin

LAYING THE GOLDEN EGG

Nestled in the heart of Seoul, Eyedentity Games is headquartered in a sophisticated office near the busy Jamsil metro station. The mood at Eyedentity is mellow and communal: while this carefully-selected team of about sixty is toiling away on Dragon Nest, a new online action RPG, the company's founders are staunch enforcers of five day work weeks, reasonable hours, and fair returns. They've dotted the halls of Eyedentity with comfy internet and game lounges, and when it comes to acknowledging performance, employees enjoy a generous profit sharing plan. Founders Chris Lee, Jungsik Park (a.k.a. Ropie), and Tae Hoon Oh, Korean game industry veterans, have tried to create a company that any developer would love to work for. And now they hope that Dragon Nest is a game that any player would love to try.

It's interesting how DN is a convergence of the founders' past experience at Phantagram and Webzen: mad third-person battlefields filled with intuitive, effects-ridden twitch action, like Ninety-Nine Nights; tactical assessments of units, stats and environments, like Kingdom Under Fire; and the online experience of Huxley, lending dedicated RPG and social systems to the action. The biggest departure for this trio is the leap from dark medieval fantasy and post-apocalyptic sci-fi to the bright and stylized art direction of Dragon Nest's world. And, as per its MMO pedigree, there's the task of creating multiplayer goals for thousands of players to enjoy together.

BY MY GODNESS!

The Goddess Altea created the world of Lagendia, where your adventures in Dragon Nest will take place. This gentle deity was happy with her creation. She planned to watch over the world and the children of her lands for centuries

...how much chaos and damage a few people can cause in the game's wild third-person action.

CHRIS LEE, CO-FOUNDER & CEO

A veteran of IT conglomerates, Chris Lee's love of gaming steered him towards Sony Computer Entertainment's early Korean operations, and then on to Webzen, where he began work on several pivotal franchises like Huxley. Recognizing the massive growth potential for new online game experiences like Dragon Nest, Chris helped to co-found Eyedentity Games, where he now holds the CEO title.

JUNGSIK PARK, DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR

First achieving fame for his outstanding work at Phantagram as art director on Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders and lead concept artist on Ninety-Nine Nights, Jungsik (better known as "Ropie" to his fans) most recently left his post at Webzen, where he was the lead artist on Huxley. He parlays his keen artistic vision into world and gameplay design as the development director at Eyedentity Games.

TAE HOON OH, TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

Like Ropie, Tae Hoon's first big gig was at Phantagram, where he held the role of technical director for several console and PC titles that hit big in both the East and West. A game engine specialist of over a dozen years, he was responsible for the system-defying Xbox visuals in KUF and the mad battlefields of Ninety-Nine Nights on 360. The proprietary Eternity engine powering Dragon Nest is his baby.

untold. This is difficult to do, even for a god, when trapped in a deep, inescapable sleep. Poisoned by her jealous sister, Vestinel, Altea now lies in perpetual slumber. Her only hope is an antidote made from the very same substance, a magic grail, used by Vestinel to enchant the poison. Unbeknownst to Vestinel, Altea now speaks to her people from a dreamscape, channeling faint words and visions through the chosen Prophets of the world. She seeks out heroes to explore the lands and find the precious stones that will form the grail, and ultimately, her freedom.

Meanwhile, Vestinel remains hidden somewhere in the mortal realms, enlisting hordes of mercenaries and beastmen to foil the players' search. She has also called upon Lagendia's most fearsome dragons to thwart potential treasure hunters. Almost the entirety of DN's early chapter campaigns will focus on the once-idyllic continent of Lemuria, a vivid fantasy tapestry of vast forests, grasslands, desert crags, icy mountains, and freshly-unearthed catacombs. The Prophets will send players into these lands to wipe out Vestinel's emissaries (and all the other scumbags running amok in this new era of discord), ultimately hunting the nine breeds of legendary dragons and ending their gemstone-addicted killing spree.

The ancient dragons are as intelligent as they are ferocious, and some of them have shunned the path of Vestinel. You'll be assisted by these rare golden dragons on the quest to save Altea, and eventually you will earn your own dragon morph form to level the playing field (and travel through areas you might otherwise avoid). In any case, it's generally a good idea to bring friends. While territory PvP battles are featured, Dragon Nest provides a story campaign that excels with four players, and it's impressive how much chaos and damage a few people can cause in the game's wild third-person action.

JUGGLING TROLLS FOR KICKS

We've come pretty far in online gaming. The twitch combat in Dragon Nest would have been a pipe dream a decade ago. Modern net code and ubiquitous broadband helps today's developers create online action experiences that are analogous to local play. Dragon Nest is a whirlwind of chain combos, aerials, and devastating area-of-effect magic. Where you may be accustomed to awkward-looking pathing and stiff animations in the typical MMO, Dragon Nest's enemies are equipped with advanced action AI, performing fast moves and adjustments rarely seen in the genre. The team's vast experience in console development certainly led them down this road.

DN's dynamic free movement combat is optimized for WASD and mouse, yet it seems perfectly suited to those who prefer using an Xbox 360 controller. It's not clear yet if regional partners will include this option as the game makes its way out of the East. Dragon Nest's work-in-progress UI is minimal, yet alluring, containing quest, player and party windows, a central mini-map, and one's special triggered items (like the red and blue potions we all love) and abilities. Each of the four characters, the Warrior, Archer, Cleric and Sorceress, begin with one ability loaded through the tutorial, hitting on the basics of combat, combos, and quests. This quickly increases as you level up.

The Archer, for example, powers up rapid fire ranged attacks to pincushion her foes: Snaring, stunning and rooting shots; multi-arrow barrages; scissor kicks; aerial juggles; and special agility boosters keep her firing and flipping across the battlefield as she pulls endless death from her quiver. The Cleric invokes healing, shielding and stat buffs; however, this hammer-toting holy man can also smite and terrify opponents with his prayers of lightning and words of power. The alluring Sorceress fulfills her destiny as massive damage dealer, with AoE spells that scorch away health, punish essential stats, and put foes to sleep. The Cloud-like Warrior steps in to protect these softies with his big, trusty blade, ripping chain attacks into brutal aerial stabs and chops.

YOU'RE ALONE IN THE DARK

With all this action, Dragon Nest will make heavy use of instancing. After shopping and conversing in world hubs, quests, which come in selectable difficulties, will navigate you to gateways and portals connecting to mission maps. DN's difficulty parameter covers a basic range, and there's a complex adaptive system that tailors the dungeon crawl experience to characters and player quantity. This won't simply manifest as static spawn point monsters with hiked-up levels and abilities. They will patrol different locations, spawn in different clusters and configurations, and generally chase away your typical MMO mission expectations via clever randomization. So your favorite crypts and fields will stay unpredictable and fun.

The acrobatic archer notches an arrow mid-flip.

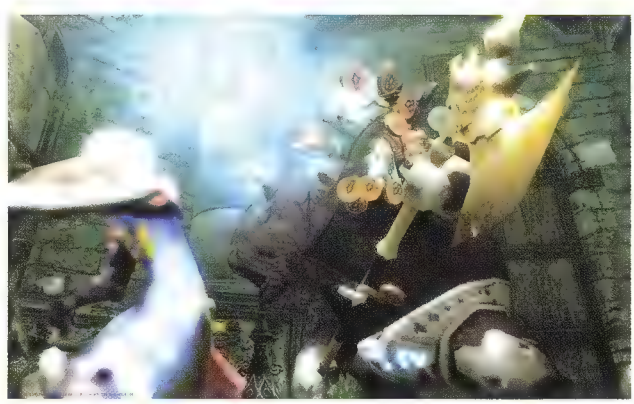
Eyedentity is counting on this element, as well as Dragon Nest's intuitive and dynamic combat, to keep players coming back. And of course there's the loot. Honoring another element of its RPG half, DN has gear to collect and equip. The archer will seek better bows and unique arrowheads, the cleric, almost like a militant mage of sorts, will wrap his hands around blunt weapons and light shields, the sorceress will funnel her room-clearing cantrips with staffs and spellbooks, and the warrior will sample implements that slash and skewer—from swords to lances.

The slaying is fast, vicious and plentiful. You'll engage goblin-folk, mutant hounds, sexy clawed succubi, thick-skinned trolls, horned orcs, massive axe-wielding minotaurs, giant six-eyed spiders, undead samurai, and the terrible summoned creatures of Vestinel. The campaign will crescendo in many battles against the huge boss dragons guarding the precious components of the magic grail. The environment also takes a beating, with exploding doors, crates, barrels and debris.

WAITING FOR AN ETERNITY

Eyedentity has described Dragon Nest's visuals as artful, premium graphics, a depiction often applied to World of Warcraft in the past. Like WoW, DN embraces a lighter complexity to ease access for lower spec users, however the lands of Lemuria are deceptively detailed in the superior Eternity engine. This proprietary tech is especially good at managing huge displays of particle effects. Eyedentity's engine master, Ropie, honors the memory of his N3 effort by filling the screen with combat chaos and tons of excellent stylized effects.

Great team, good lore, stylish presentation and skillful action begs the question: When is Dragon Nest coming to North America? It's on schedule for a fall '09 release in Korea, so early 2010 is the answer. Nexon America is in the midst of heavy promotion for another action MMORPG hybrid, *Dungeon Fighter Online*, thus Dragon Nest will join the impressive Mabinogi Heroes on a very strong 2010 roster. play



The cleric dazzles an enraged bovine foe with holy light.

System: PC **Developer:** Monte Cristo **Publisher:** Monte Cristo **Multi:** MMO mode **Available:** October

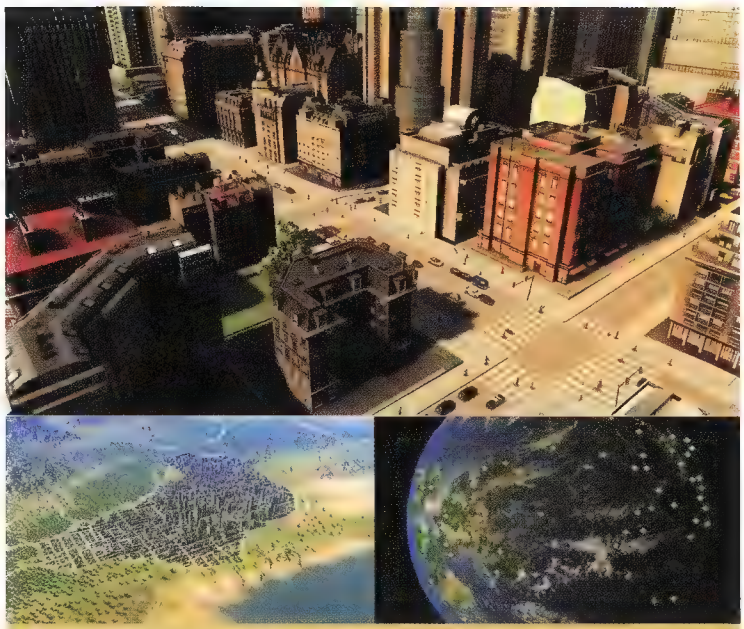
Cities XL

Super-sized urban planning

Paris and Kiev-based developer Monte Cristo has grown accustomed to the SimCity comparisons. It's a stigma that has been following the team since its previous title, City Life. Interestingly, the more people propagate this comparison, it seems the more SimCity fans migrate over to Monte Cristo's city builder games. The developer's upcoming next-gen progression of the genre is Cities XL, laying a foundation on PCs in October.

If anything will end the SimCity comparisons once and for all, it's the stunning level of detail that Monte Cristo is achieving in Cities XL. Where SimCity often used approximations of world regions, Cities XL draws upon real maps of actual topographical data and photos. Your city can be built with deep, dense complexity, ready for scrutiny from aerial views or street level. Zoom right down to the graffiti-tagged wall of a coffee shop beside the Empire State Building. Check out the streets, signs and groves around Mount St. Helens. The outstanding rendering of the city and world around these landmarks isn't achieved via tricks of repetition of shuddering LoD pops; this is just powerful next-gen rendering.

25 very sandboxy single-player levels are included in the campaign, but Cities XL is the first city-builder to feature, for all intents and purposes, a full massively multiplayer component. You can log-in to a vast community (already 10,000 strong in beta) for the game's ambitious MMO-like persistent "Planet" mode, building urban sprawls, populations and economies across a multiplayer globe. Handy web tools will enable you to monitor and control your city systems from a web browser, so you can play mayor during downtime at work… **Mike Griffin**



If anything will end SimCity comparisons, it's the stunning detail.

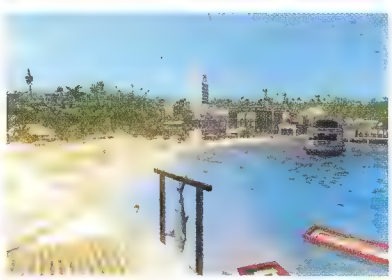
System: PC, Xbox 360 **Dev:** Haemimont Games **Pub:** Kalypso Media **Multi:** Island domination **Avail:** Sept

Tropico 3

The island of El Presidente

Kalypso Media, a traditionally PC-centric boutique publisher, is taking its first bold steps into the console market—extending an exclusive commitment to Microsoft platforms. The new venture is kicking off this fall in Tropico 3 for Windows PCs and Xbox 360, the third game in Kalypso's cult-hit tropical island management series.

The Tropico series takes the best elements of strategic titles, city builders and manager games and thrusts players into a beautiful tropical paradise where you'll work to improve the quality of life for your citizens. As you deal with the El Presidente of an idyllic, yet troubled 1950s-inspired South American island in Tropico 3, your elite educated Avatars will establish ties to secret police and engage in important diplomacy with cold war superpowers, USA and Russia, all while juggling trade and natural resources (like oil, lumber) to avert financial ruin. The world itself will also play a role, as natural disasters like tropical storms and earthquakes soak and rattle the populace, each with specific after-effects to mitigate (such as crumbling industry and potential casualties).



Tropico 3 will ship with comprehensive multiplayer and modding opportunities. Online, you'll be able to invite others into your island campaigns and attempt to take over each other's network of islands. The modding tools include timeline scripting for total control over events, so you can tailor your maps and island parameters to a storyline like nuclear crisis, political rebellion, or perhaps an end of days scenario where some terrible force (you!) is wreaking tropical havoc with the power of the earth and sea. **Mike Griffin**

Tropico takes the best elements of strategic titles, city builders and manager games

Premium summer betas

S

Aion

Ascending to a new fantasy

1. **Supreme polish:** Even in the earlier version of the game featured in the North American beta, Aion exhibits impressive polish. The combination of a huge development team and multiple previous betas in other territories has yielded a very refined game: tight combat mechanics, quality default UI, and a beautifully optimized CryEngine that renders Aion's exotic fantasy world and inspired art direction.
2. **Version 1.5:** This number won't ring any bells for those who aren't following Aion's development, but it means everything to the game's condition at launch. In a rare feat of MMO localization, NCsoft West will release our North American Aion at version 1.5, the same as its Korean counterpart. While our comprehensively localized Western version will contain more character customization and cinematics, it will also, more importantly, include all the awesome content of three major updates. 1.5 welcomes loads of new dungeons, two entirely new regions, new skills, new wings, more recipes, new item sets with bonuses, new PvP rewards, and a laundry list of other enhancements. NCsoft's Seattle team is delivering the goods.
3. **PvPvE for all:** Not just a mutant acronym, the PvPvE element is indelibly etched into Aion's genetics. With dozens of new quests and significantly increased experience rewards, a person can conceivably PvE quest their way to the current level 50 cap in version 1.5. However, you'd be missing out on the thrill of dedicated Player vs. Player combat in enemy realms and within the sprawling, epic Abyss—where the greatest PvE opponents reside.

Champions Online

A comic fan's online utopia

1. **Millennium City:** While Champions Online features other big zones ranging from southern deserts, to the Canadian wilderness and tropical Monster Island, the real gem is Millennium City. Though perhaps lacking the complexity of something like GTA IV's Liberty City, MC is very close to that sprawling urban sandbox effect. The districts, landmarks and oceanfront look rather epic when viewed from hundreds of feet over street level, coasting along on one's rocket boots.
2. **Travel powers:** As mentioned above, travel in Champions Online is an absolute joy. Where the godly themes of Aion's lovely wings capture the imagination, but limit free flight to certain zones, CO empowers you with virtually limitless mobility through its heroic travel powers. Super speed, super jump, flight power, rockets, ice slides, Spiderman-like web travel, teleports, tunneling—if it's comic book-style mobility you crave in a MMO, Champions lets you master navigation and combat in every axis.
3. **Frequent upgrades:** Champions Online upgrades your character at a very steady and satisfying pace while leveling up in its RPG systems. You get those fun travel powers very early on, and the abilities keep rolling with frequent skill-ups. When you're not receiving a brand new superpower to play with, Champions offers you advantages and core stats to enhance those powers, or give them entirely new sub-properties. Combined with CO's celebrated character maker, where you can be insanely creative, this assault of upgrades and customization really strengthens that bond between player and avatar.

And Preteens Shall Rule the Skies:

Rise of the Shmup-Box 360

words Nick Des Barres and Casey Loe

The 2D shooter was gaming's first genre, and I'm convinced it will outlive us all. The Man may try to stamp it down, but like weeds breaking through concrete, 2D shooters always pop up again somewhere else. At the moment, that somewhere else is the Japanese Xbox 360, where shmups are in full flourish on what seems to otherwise be a dying platform.

The same thing happened last generation on the Dreamcast, where small shooter publishers kept the console alive for years after Sega abandoned it. Now they've moved on to the Xbox 360, where the dedicated hardcore user base has shown a similar appetite for the genre. (If you're wondering why all these games are 360 exclusives, the answer lies in Sony's content-approval process; if it doesn't look next gen, they don't want it.) The economics of the genre are peculiar; while Americans are reluctant to pay even $10 to download shooter masterpieces like Ikaruga, even mediocre boxed Japanese shooters retail in the $80-$90 range. They're designed to be profitable with sales of only 10,000 or so, with a smash hit like Cave's DeathSmiles selling a whopping 30K. The games are mostly arcade ports, so they're cheap to make, and many of the ports are, sadly, cheaply made indeed.

Although nothing could be easier to localize than a shooter, only a few games from the Xbox 360's shooter library have found their way to the states, most prominently Raiden Fighter Aces and the upcoming Raiden IV. Part of the problem is the price; Japanese fans wouldn't like seeing a game for which they paid $90 be converted to cheap DLC in other territories, and there aren't a lot of western gamers clamoring to pay full price for a boxed 2D shooter than barely fills a third of their HD display and that can be beaten in 45 minutes. The recent trend of "cute-'em-up" shooters—in which Japanese developers have replaced classic spaceship heroes like Vic Viper and the R9 with flying teen and preteen girls—probably isn't helping the genre's western prospects any. While the Japanese trend of busty-and/or-disturbingly-young-girls-as-aircraft is sort of pathetic (look forward to hot anime chicks taking the place of period airplanes in an upcoming Xbox 360 WWII sim—no joke), the moe aesthetic adds a lot of color to the genre, and the action is as hardcore as it's ever been.

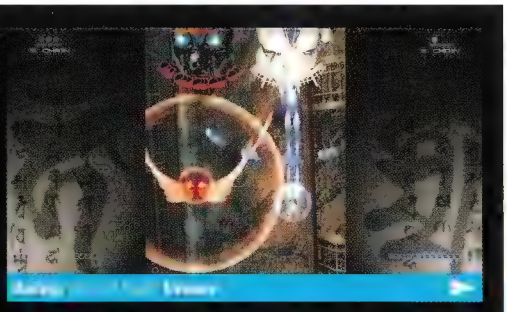
Import shooters are not a poor person's hobby.

And so, shooters remain one of the last great import genres. It's not a poor man's hobby; all of these titles are region-coded, so you'll need a Japanese Xbox 360 to play them, and the games themselves are quite pricey. You may also want to invest in a joystick and, if you want to have the optimal experience with the overhead shooters, a monitor that can be flipped sidewise so you can play the games in full screen mode. If it's any consolation, the small print runs and the timeless nature of the genre are likely to make these games collector's items one day—a lot of the Dreamcast shooters remain among the priciest titles in the platform's library.

Shmupping on the Cheap: 20 Great DLC Shooters

Xbox 360

American 360 owners can download one of the greatest—and hardest—vertical shooters ever made, Treasure's Ikaruga. They can also pick up a few modern, original attempts at the genre in the form of Omega Five and Space Invader Extreme, and the passable Dreamcast port Trigger Heart Exelica. R-Type Dimensions is a must for old-school shooter fans.

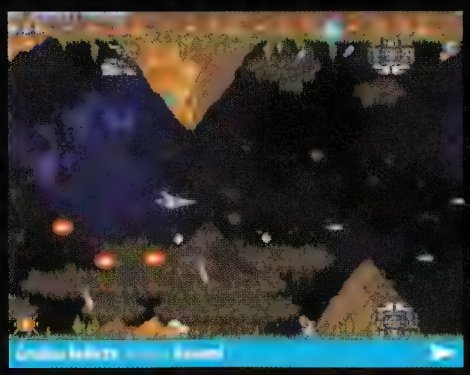


Wii

Gradius Rebirth is by far the best of the original WiiWare shooters. Instead of wasting your WiiPoints on the other tepid entries, bring 'em to Virtual Console where you can pick up true classics of yesteryear, like SNES shooters R-Type III and Axelay (which was made by Treasure before they were called Treasure), the TurboGrafx Soldier series, especially Final Soldier and Soldier Blade, and the Turbo CD masterpieces Gate of Thunder and Lords of Thunder.

PS3

The only classic-style shooter on PSN is the so-so Soldner-X, and since Sony hates America, you can't buy anything worth a crap from the PS Classics library. But if you're hardcore, you can pick up a Japanese PSN Points card on eBay and download a half-dozen PSOne classics from the Japanese marketplace, including Taito masterworks G Darius, RayStorm, and RayCrisis, IREM's R-Types and R-Type Delta, Square's Einhander, and the super-rare Gaia Seed.



System: Xbox 360 Developer: Cave Publisher: Cave

DeathSmiles

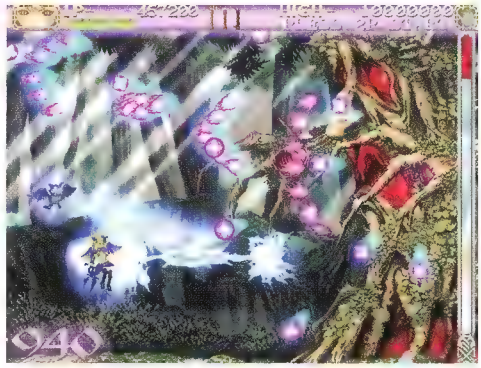
words Casey Loe

Now that Treasure has seemingly abandoned the genre, the undisputed lords of the 2D shooter are Cave. Their vertical-scrolling Donpachi and Mushihime-sama franchises have ruled the genre in Japanese game centers, and seen occasional licensed ports (but few western releases) on home consoles. DeathSmiles is only the company's second attempt at a side-scrolling shooter, and the first home port ever done by the game's own development team. Amazingly, the results easily stand as the best 2D shooter of this generation.

DeathSmiles stars four young girls, aged 11 to 17, clad in gothic lolita fashions and accompanied by animal familiars, soaring through a series of colorful, Halloween-themed locations. The visual style is a little off-putting for those of us who grew up in shooter worlds of black and grey, but when the action picks up, it doesn't matter that the screen is filled with floating pumpkins and hot pink bullets—a great shooter is a great shooter. And the innovation goes far beyond the aesthetics, as DeathSmiles introduces a handful of clever mechanics that give the gameplay as unique of a flavor as the visuals.

You can fire left or right with individual buttons, or hold them together to enter a lock-on mode in which you fire at the nearest target, allowing you to auto-aim at enemies above and below. There is no initially selectable difficulty setting; instead, you choose the difficulty level of each stage individually, so that you can make stages that you've already mastered more challenging without

Cave has made over 20 shooters, and the experience shows in every aspect of the game's level design, pacing, and clarity.



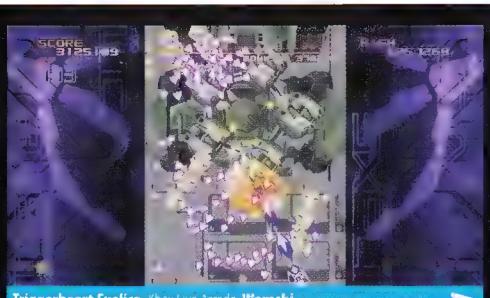
making the later stages brutally difficult. (The final stage is always set to the highest difficulty, however.) Most impressively, DeathSmiles brings the sheer "bullet hell" of overhead shooters to a side-scroller, which are typically slower-paced and more memorization-focused. The hit

box of your character is limited to only the clearly visible orange heart on her chest, so her legs, wings and head can pass right through enemy bullets unharmed. This provides the rare sensation of a game cheating in you favor, while allowing the developers to fill the screen with hundreds of bullets and still provide a fighting chance at survival.

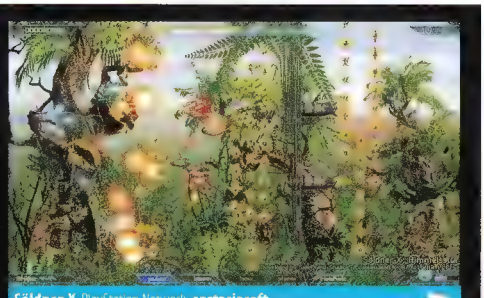
The shooter genre is legendary for shoddy ports, and console-version purchasers are usually happy just to get a product free of game-breaking bugs. But Cave has taken the unusual step of not only adding new modes, but improving the game's graphics to take advantage of the Xbox 360's higher resolution. Not everything has been redone; 2D background and character sprites have merely been scaled up and blurred a bit, but the pre-rendered enemies and projectiles have all been re-rendered at HD resolutions. It's a bit of a mess in screenshots, but looks quite good in motion. (A version with original arcade graphics is also on the disc.) Cave have also included a second 360-original mode in which you can directly control your familiar (which fires independently and can absorb certain types of bullets), and rebalanced the game to account for it. It would have been wonderful if they could have redrawn the character sprites and widened the game's viewable area to better fit HDTVs, but it's a pretty impressive port by shooter standards.

Like most shooters, you can just keep choosing "continue" to beat the game in under an hour, but with four characters to play as, three difficulty settings per level, and an original remixed mode, DeathSmiles feels quite substantive. It also offers online co-op with respectable netcode, and meaningful, challenging achievements that drive players towards varied goals instead of just throwing all 1,000G at you in obvious ways.

But DeathSmiles is more than the sum of its features. Cave has made over 20 shooters, and the experience shows in every aspect of the game's level design, pacing, and clarity. DeathSmiles can be extremely hard, but never feels unfair, and while the screen is packed with bullets and enemies, it's always apparent what is and isn't a threat. These are high-level aspects of shooter design that you rarely notice until a developer gets them wrong, and Cave almost never does. That, more than the game's clever innovations and adorable style, is what makes it the crown jewel of the Xbox 360's import-shooter library.



Triggerheart Exelica Xbox Live Arcade **Warashi**



Söldner-X PlayStation Network **eastasiasoft**

Otomedius G

System: Xbox 360 **Developer:** Konami/M2 **Publisher:** Konami

words Casey Loe

After a long reign as the king of arcade shooters, Konami ceased making Gradius-series coin-ops nearly a decade ago. But in 2007 someone figured out a way to make Gradius relevant again in today's marketplace. Bring back the classic mechanics, but throw in a bunch of busty chicks in fetish costumes and have them seemingly hump the player's spaceship. It wouldn't have been my first choice for Gradius's bold new direction, but if that's what it takes to get KOEI's marketing department to sign off on a new 2D shooter, so be it.

It's actually not the first time Konami has gone this direction, but unlike Sexy Parodius (a Saturn classic), the graphics of Otomedius are much too bland and uninspired to work as either titillation or parody. The bosses you fight are mostly just lame ships, the environments are simple and humorless, and the plasticky rendered graphics can't hold a candle to the charming hand-drawn sprites of yesteryear. It's nice to have a 2D shooter that actually has a full HD resolution mode, but with such tepid visuals, it's hard to get excited about the additional on-screen real estate.

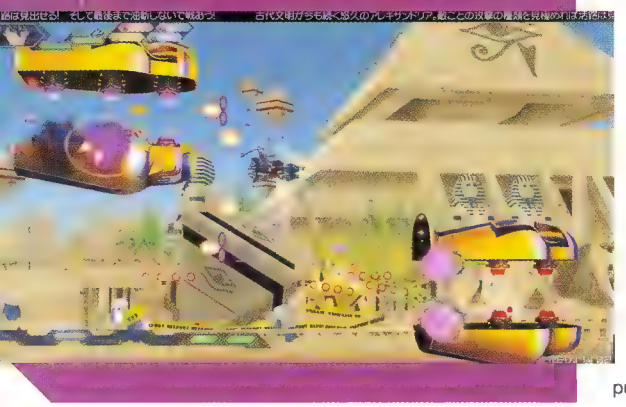
That's just as well, because Otomedius Gorgeous, the home-exclusive HD mode, isn't a whole lot of fun to play. The action in Otomedius should hardly be taxing to the Xbox 360, but the mode has a lot of slowdown and performance concerns seemed to have necessitated spreading the enemies further apart and cutting out the game's bomb-like special attacks. Otomedius Gorgeous also dispenses with the shield bar (relegating it instead to the most expensive power-up option), a terrible decision that leaves you so vulnerable when you die and continue that a single death will almost always lead to a frustrating cascade of failure.

Fortunately, the original arcade version is on the disc too, and is a much better game. The enemy layouts feel tighter, the special attacks add a bit of depth, and the shield bar reduces the frustration factor significantly. As with DeathSmiles, this mode also allows you to custom-select the difficulty of each stage, which is always a welcome feature; the game is actually quite easy at the Normal mode, but the higher difficulty modes offer a satisfying challenge. Unfortunately, you can only play the arcade mode at standard definition resolution.

Fortunately, the original arcade version is on the disc too, and is a much better game.

As with most Gradius games, in Otomedius you collect capsules to highlight new options on a power-up bar at the bottom of the screen, from which you can select exactly the power-ups you want. Playing the game in either mode will earn you points that you can spend to customize each character's power-up bar and add higher-level versions of each weapon, which adds a fair amount of replay value. But even in arcade mode, the game just isn't much fun to replay in search of points. It's short, the bosses are dull, and with a few exceptions, the level designs are very familiar and uninspired.

Otomedius is one of the weaker games in the series, but it's still feels like Gradius, which makes for a nice plate of comfort food for old-school shooter fans. But so did Gradius Rebirth, and that costs a tiny fraction of Otomedius's price. I wouldn't put a lot of effort into tracking down this one.



System: Xbox 360 Developer: Gulti Publisher: G.rev

Mamoru-kun wa Norowareteshimatta!

[Mamoru-kun is Cursed!]

words Nick Des Barres

Prior to this recent rash of 2-D shooters on Xbox 360, I had not played a game in the genre since Triggerheart Exelica and Karous on Dreamcast. Shockingly, that was two and a half years ago. Would it even have even been possible to go that long without playing a shooter at any previous point in gaming history? If you're anything like me, probably not. Perhaps that's why I approached this petit shooting renaissance on Xbox 360 with such enthusiasm, rediscovering the basic, yet intense delights the genre offers. I side with compatriot Casey Loe in declaring DeathSmiles the best of the bunch, but Gulti's Mamoru-kun wa Norowareteshimatta! ranks as a close second.

If Dodonpachi and Shooting Love. 200X (covered on the following pages) represent extensions of the stoic lone-fighter-on-a-mission sub-genre, Mamoru-kun is an enthusiastic nod to the zany character-based PC-Engine shooters of olde. Although chock-full of old-school anime mirth like an Air Zonk or Toilet Kids, Mamoru-kun is most reminiscent of Taito's venerable Kiki Kaikai/Pocky & Rocky. Like that game, you manipulate the action instead of being forced to scroll, and can fire in multiple directions with the right stick.

Every shooter needs its gimmick, and Mamoru-kun's is the Noroi-dan, or "curse shot." Charged up to four levels and released with the B button or right trigger, the curse shot has a surprising number of functions: At levels 1-4, it creates increasingly wider circles of "cursed ground" on the screen, which deals damage to any enemies that enter its borders but also causes them to fire extra bullets. By releasing a curse shot below level 1 (i.e., instantly), you curse yourself, which powers your character up beyond maximum, but drops you a level when the effect wears off. On-screen bullets are eradicated when you release a curse shot, which is frequently the only way to avoid the curtains of hypnotic pellets released by bosses. Finally, the process of charging a curse shot sucks bonus items towards your character, like an Onimusha warrior inhaling souls. It's an awful lot to think about while playing, which makes Mamoru-kun more tactical than a standard vertical "bullet hell" shooter.

A standard arcade mode is available, but the story mode is where Mamoru-kun truly shines. Endearingly written, presented, and voice acted, the non-linear story mode charges you with taking control of all five Mamoru-kun characters in sequence—a replacement pops up immediately when the previous one dies, and dead characters can be revived by collecting bonus items from treasure chests or enemies. The story mode is even non-linear (!): If certain tasks and conditions are not met in every stage, you cannot fight the last boss and are forced to loop.

Mamoru-kun wa Norowareteshimatta! is charming, beautifully art directed and essentially unassailable: It makes no pretensions, and does what it does extremely well. It may not be worth dropping ducats on an import 360 for Mamoru-kun alone, but combined with DeathSmiles and, say, Otomedius G or Shooting Love., the prospect starts to look attractive for the die-hard shooting freak.

Mamoru-kun is an enthusiastic nod to the zany character-based PC-Engine shooters of olde.

System: Xbox 360 Developer: Cave Publisher: 5pb.

Dodonpachi Dai-Ou-Jou Black Label EXTRA

words Nick Des Barres

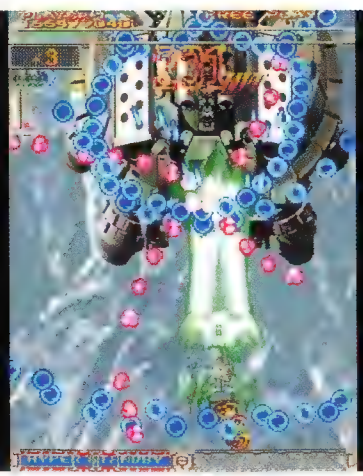
The Xbox 360 release of shooting champ Cave's Dodonpachi Dai-Ou-Jou by dubious publisher 5pb. represents one of the biggest gaming scandals in recent memory. Despite the undisputed quality of the core game, 5pb.'s port of the arcade original was ridden with literally dozens of bugs, ranging from the fairly innocuous (discrepancies from the original), to the major (unresponsive menus, options that do nothing, Achievements refusing to unlock), to the game-breaking (multiple freeze bugs). It was pulled from store shelves shortly after release, which seemed rather harsh treatment for a game that should logically be patchable.

A few weeks later, it was revealed why. Aqua Systems, the company that handled the port, had reverse-engineered Arika's emulation code from the PS2 version of the game, illegally appropriating it for use on Xbox 360. Despite this shocking revelation (or perhaps because of a financial settlement) Arika has magnanimously agreed to work on a patch for the game. It is for this reason we're covering Dai-Ou-Jou—should it be patched into a flawless state, it will be one of the best shooters on the system.

Dai-Ou-Jou is known as a viciously difficult game, and has been hailed as perhaps the defining "bullet hell" shooter. Just how hard is it? Allegedly, ten months passed after the arcade release before anyone was able to beat it completely. (Dai-Ou-Jou requires two full playthroughs to finish, the second being several orders of magnitude more difficult than the first). This is not a feel-good, pop shooter like DeathSmiles or Mamoru-kun: It is dark, brutal, and punishing. Merely learning enough bullet patterns to survive can take weeks, let alone how to keep your enemy chain going throughout the length of a level. Pleasantly, 5pb. took time off from their source code theft to create a very decent "X Mode," an easier, 360-original mode that is more immediately satisfying than arcade mode.

Dodonpachi: Dai-Ou-Jou is very much a throwback to the late Saturn/Dreamcast age, drawing its stoic, hard-line inspiration from the early danmaku (literally, "bullet curtain") era of shooting. They just don't make them like this anymore (indeed, one might argue that Dai-Ou-Jou is a throwback to a throwback—the original arcade release was in 2002), so here's hoping Arika's promised patch arrives some time soon.

Should it be patched into a flawless state, [Dai-Ou-Jou] will be one of the best shooters on the system.



Upcoming 360 Shooter Mini-Previews

Mushihime-sama Futari

Cave Late 2009 (Japan)

Prompted by the surprising success of DeathSmiles (over 30,000 units, a massive number for a 2D shooter), Cave has committed to releasing their previous game Mushihime-sama Futari on 360 as well. Like DeathSmiles, many original home version features and graphical enhancements are promised.

0 Day Attack On Earth

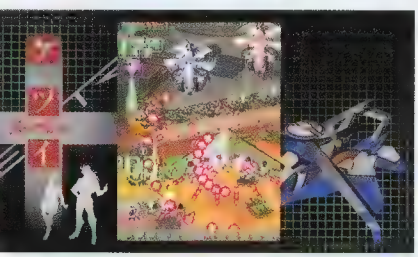
Gulti/Square Enix 2009 (Xbox Live!)

Gulti (developer of the winning, if radically different in style Mamoru-kun wa Norowareteshimatta!) teams up with Square Enix for this alien-bashing Xbox Live! shooter, which merges photorealistic 3D visuals and traditional 2D gameplay.

Ketsui Extra

Cave/5pb. Late 2009 (Japan)

After the debacle with 5pb.'s port of Dodonpachi Dai-Ou-Jou (see previous page), it's probably safe to say the company is being extra careful not to screw up their next Cave license, Ketsui. Let's hope they don't, as the game has never been available for a home console before.



The King of Fighters Sky Stage

SNK Playmore 2009 (Xbox Live!)

The King of Fighters XII may have been lackluster, but how can Sky Stage be anything but AWESOME? Is it even possible to screw up a game with Kyo Kusanagi flying like a superhero? We'll find out later this year when it's released on Live.

Shooting Love. 200X

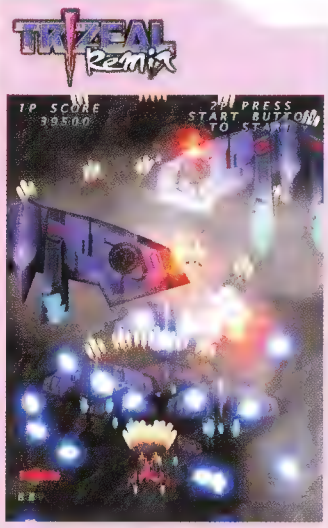
words Nick Des Barres

Even if you care little for their games, you have to respect Triangle Service. How many other three-man companies can claim to have released a packaged Xbox 360 game? I'm guessing the answer is not many, and I'm guessing even fewer have been any good.

Shooting Love. 200X is the ultimate compilation of Triangle Service's past "hits" (minus XII Stag, the game they developed for Taito), along with the original console title Minus Zero. The visuals may be, frankly, laughable—most of what's on the disc would have looked unprofessional in the PSone era—but the titular love is here in spades.

Shooting Love. 200X is most certainly not about the pretty, but it is about the content: You get four full shooters, each wildly innovative in their own particular ways. The only game here you may have heard of is Trizeal, the 2005 Dreamcast game that Triangle Service famously made a public plea for fans to buy. It's probably the most polished-looking game in the collection, with a unique non-linear level structure, but otherwise fairly standard. Its sequel Exzeal looks far worse, but makes up for it with ultra-technical Ikaruga-style gameplay (despite insisting it be regarded as a "regular shooter" on the title screen!).

The real gems here, however, are Shmups Skill Test and the hypnotic Minus Zero. Skill Test is a biting, brilliant parody



Shooting Love. 200X is most certainly not about the pretty, but it is about the content.

of Nintendo's Brain Age, full of surreal Wario Ware-esque "challenges" that pay direct homage to classic shooters of the past ranging from Fantasy Zone to Donpachi. Completing them will give you in-depth ratings on your "Gamer Age"—and I'd trust them, for if any game developer is the equivalent to Dr. Kawashima, it's Triangle Service's programmer-president, Toshiaki Fujino. Minus Zero is a structurally simple "only lock-on shooter," in which the target also acts as your "ship." Psychedelic and trippy, yet with a bohemian, underground feel that goes against the slick club

aesthetic of an Every Extend, it may be my personal favorite game in the collection—though I recognize Skill Test is by far the better game.

Each title in Shooting Love. 200X is so solid, and the gameplay so smart, I imagine they'd be hailed as masterpieces if their visual presentation matched the content. With that said, I can only recommend this collection to the hardest of the hardcore shooter fans. Considering such people are exactly who it's targeted at, however, maybe that's not such a bad thing: If you have true shooting love in your heart, you need Shooting Love. play

Released by: FUNimation **Studio:** BONES **Episodes:** n/a **ESRB:** TV-PG **Running Time:** 35 mins. **Available:** Now

Fullmetal Alchemist
Premium OVA Collection

Tasty, but Tiny

words Bill Gray

When I was a kid, one of my favorite parts of going to a birthday party was, well, leaving it. If the party was well-planned, leaving meant you were sent home with a little goodie bag stuffed with candy, a cheap toy or two, maybe some stickers. The sheer randomness and surprise of what was in the bag made for a fun ride home, even if the occasional apple or orange got slipped in there as well. *Fullmetal Alchemist: Premium OVA Collection*, is FUNimation's little goodie bag for long-time fans of the series and the movie.

Here's the rundown of what's on the disc: An "interactive" experience, consisting of a series of short vignettes that re-explain the world of FMA, complete with an introduction of all of the major characters; a live-action featurette; a thoughtful little short called "Kids"; and a completely random, off-the-wall chibi wrap party, which gives you a peek into what the characters from the show did after they finished "shooting" the movie, animated in delightful chibi style.

Trouble is, unless you're a hopeless FMA fanboy (or girl, like our esteemed Heather Anne—check out her reviews of *Brotherhood* online at playmagazine.com), you'll probably walk away from the disc wondering what else is on the disc that you may have missed. A secret menu somewhere? A hidden track? Something! The content, fun thought it is, clocks in at a measly 35 minutes—pricey when you compare it to the massive 12-episode thinpaks FUNi's been releasing of late. A tasty little parting gift for FMA fans, emphasis on the word "little." play

The Premium OVA Collection is FUNimation's little goodie bag for long-time fans of the series.

parting shot

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Released by: VIZ **Running Time:** 300 minutes **Episodes:** 1-12 **Available:** September 22, 2009

Honey and Clover
Box Set Volume 1

Masterpiece

There are two anime in my life that I will look back on for the rest of it. One is *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The other is *Honey and Clover*. I am so close to this show that writing about it is actually difficult. I want to convince people to watch it—I want to find the code, the string of words that will get people to pick up the box set, watch it on Hulu, download it from iTunes. I beg you, a new audience, to bear witness. Sit through to the end. *Honey and Clover* is about you.

Honey and Clover is a masterpiece. The design, the characters, the music, the direction; it's touching, dramatic, poignant, and funny. And above all, charming. The series follows six major characters through university. They're art students, design professors, taking and teaching classes on sculpture, architecture, painting. There's no clear protagonist—this is more of a mosaic, viewed up close so that each tile is interesting.

Most of the action revolves around a particularly gifted student, Hagumi Hanamoto, and the two men who are interested in her: the quiet and hungry Yuta Takemoto, and Shinobu Morita—who is cursed with being dashing, clever, and self-destructive. But tertiary characters receive just as much, if not more, attention. *Honey and Clover* doesn't take the easy route to a straightforward narrative; you learn as much about *everyone* as you do about the each person, and that includes the narrator, Takemoto.

The show is melancholic, melodramatic, plain, bold. Yet the emotional range of the show isn't forecast by its first episodes. Initially broad, the show tightens until delicate. As much as I don't want to compare it to something else, I'm desperate to get you to try it. So: *Honey and Clover* recalls BBC's *The Office*. What made the British original spectacular was not only its vision of comedy, but the longing and pity that tempered the whole. Life is a mixture of emotions: Pain, love, joy. The greatest works of art capture all of these in some measure.

Our time is too short to waste on people who are afraid to experience the full range of our condition. If you look at these screen-shots and say, "No way! That looks *gay*," then we're never going to have anything to communicate about anyway. Our conversations would be lost across a chasm of differences. For those willing to cross the divide, to give the show a shot, I commend you. You are real. You exist.

Preview it on Hulu if you need to. (Watch it subtitled, whatever you do). *Honey and Clover* may be colored in hues too pastel for some, but I promise you, the palette of its relationships is universal. play

parting shot

Will the BETRAYAL of one, mean the END for them all?

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In a world where technology is becoming thinner, sleeker and sexier you'd be hard pressed not to call the Cinemin Swivel the world's most versatile portable multimedia pico projector.

This thing wiggles and waggles like a cat baby

Grip-iT

Total Control $8.00 www.shopgripit.com

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iHome iP1

www.ihomeaudio.com $299.99

Like any market, the iPod/MP3 stereo space is flooded with product, a few good, most cheap and not worth your money. The iHome iP1 is the pleasing exception, standing at the front of the crowd.

Before you even get to the sound, the open back is a nice design flourish, extending the eye through the cradle around the long woofer casings. The unit is weighty, exceptionally built and decidedly attractive—one of the better lookers on the market, elegant and understated. It's slightly treble heavy, and a little mid-range light, but you can adjust levels with the remote to balance out the sound, which is rich and clean and impressively punchy. The bass is entirely generated from the main unit; no hollow sounding sub-woofer here. As a whole, the 100-watt sound is pleasingly precise and detailed.

While the unit is on the larger side and isn't what you should have in mind if you're looking for the clock-radio template of iPod stereos, there simply is no substituting this quality of sound for space constraints. And besides, the iP1 is relatively compact as is and a lovely compliment to the rest of your furniture. The sound is substantial and pleasing to the degree that you could use it as a primary stereo anywhere in the house.

The appeal of any stereo is often subjective, but iP1 is a standout and justifies the price. Give it a listen if you're in the market for a higher-end iPhone/iPod stereo.

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